

Humility: Advancing the Kingdom in Weakness

The advancement of God's Kingdom through the humble/afflicted circumstances of the church

I. Humility is a reflection of the image of God, as much as justice and mercy are.

A. Humility in Adam, Christ and the Church

1. Before the fall into sin, Adam's Covenant relationship with God required a measure of deep humility. Adam was obligated by God to trust and rely on Him completely for a deep, full understanding of good and evil, Gen 2:8-10, 15-17. Humility is not a trait that is only required of sinful man after the fall; nor is it only related to "teaching sinful men a good, necessary lesson." Rather, humility is an expression of the image of God. In fact, God Himself acts in humility towards his people and creation repeatedly throughout the Scriptures.

Psalm 8; Isaiah 66:1-2; 1 Peter 5:5-7 all reflect on the willingness of the Lord to "condescend" (lower himself; stoop; humble) to bless and meet us as his people

The word humility is strongly related to gentleness and is one of the fruits of the Spirit in the life of the Christian, Gal 5:22, 23. Jesus describes himself, the express image of God, as "gentle and humble in heart," Luke 11:29.

2. The very nature of rebellion and breaking the Covenant is an act of arrogance and pride on the part of man in which he seeks to overthrow the rule of God and become a "god to himself," Gen 3:4, 5. This pride becomes the core element in the human heart that leads to oppression, injustice and indifference in the world, Gen 3:12; 4:8, 23,24; 6:11,12; 11:4, Rom 1.
3. After the fall, the experience of humility in a broken, proud, abusive world takes the look of "affliction," "oppression," and is connected to the poor.

The Hebrew word for humble here is ANAH- humble; afflicted; meek -- Used 32 times in the Psalms and 25 times in the Prophets.

Psalm 9:11,12, 17-18; 10:12-15; 25:8-10, 16-18; 37:10-11; 34:2 cf6,7, 17-22; 76:8-9; Isa 11"1-4, 53:7 cf Psalm 22;

- B. Humility, like all other moral traits in Scripture, has a look to it. It is not less than, but certainly more than an attitude of the heart. Our understanding of the call for the church to walk in humility (Micah 6:8) as we seek God's kingdom, means both a call to turn away from an internal heart and mindset of arrogance and pride, and also a call to walk in humble, even "afflicted" circumstances in order to see the kingdom come. The nature and purpose of the kingdom and the nature of the pride of the human heart require this.

II. The Call to Humility/Humble/Afflicted Circumstances in the Old Testament

The Covenant Message to the People of Israel in Genesis – Deuteronomy: God leads His people into 'humble circumstances' in order to advance His kingdom

A. The Patriarchs - Abraham

1. Abraham's call - Genesis 12: 1-3

- The call is to trust God to make him a great nation
- The focus is to bless all the nations of the earth
- The requirement is to follow God to a "place I will show you"
- The means is to give birth to a child by an elderly, childless couple

2. The litany of humble circumstances - Genesis 12:10 – 25:11

- On arrival, the drought and the oppressive Egyptian Pharaoh
- The division of the land with Lot
- The war with 4 conquering kings
- The lengthy delay of the birth
- The sign of the covenant: circumcision
- The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the lessons on prayer for justice
- The oppression of Abimelech
- The birth of Isaac
- The sacrifice of Isaac
- The death of Sarah and the burial plot
- The wife for Isaac

3. Isaac/Jacob/Joseph - Gen 25-50

Oppression, injustice, weakness, humble circumstances repeated. The commentary of Psalm 105.

B. The humble circumstances of Israel's birth as a Nation

1. The 400 year slavery and the Exodus
2. Moses the Sheep herder (cf Genesis 46:34) and a shepherd's staff, Ex 4:17
3. The desert experience -- Deuteronomy 8:1-20 all a gift
4. The warfare: The Red Sea deliverance; the Amalekites' defeat Exodus 17:8ff

All of this puts Israel in the position of being the "poor and needy," the "humbled and afflicted" who must look to the Lord for their deliverance.

C. The call to maintain a position of humility in the law

1. The Kings -- Deuteronomy 17:14ff
2. The army -- Deuteronomy 20:1ff
3. The Feasts and the Year of Jubilee "returning to the humble circumstances"
Exodus 3:14-17, cf Leviticus 23:42, 43; Leviticus 25:4-12, 18-22

D. The experience of Israel throughout her history: the paradigm applied

1. Joshua and the Judges -- 360 years of history
 - The lessons of Jericho – Joshua 5:8; 6:8
 - The lessons of Ai - - defeated because of sin; not because of failure of military might

- The “sun stands still” against the Amorites - Joshua 10:12-14: key “the Lord was fighting for Israel”
- Othniel - Judges 3:28, Ehud - Judges 3:28, Shamgar - Judges 3:31, Deborah/Barak - Judges 5:20-27; Gideon - Judges 7:2-8; Samson - Judges 15:14, 16:17

2. The Kings and Prophets

- David and Goliath - I Samuel 17:45-47; David and the Philistines - II Samuel 5:22-25; Jehoshaphat, 2 Chronicles 21:14ff. Cf. the sin of David- 2 Sam 24:1-4, 10ff.
- The anti-paradigm of Solomon - Deuteronomy 17 cf. I Kings 9:6,7 10:14 – 11:12, especially the Temple, cf Acts 7:47-53
- The anti-paradigm of Rehoboam - I Kings 12:1-4, 12-15 cf. Jeremiah22:15-17
- The early prophets - Elijah – Mt. Carmel - I Kings 18:22ff and Elisha - Naaman - II Kings 5
- The later prophets- Isa 52:13 – 52:12; Jer 31:1-9; Hosea 2:14, 15 cf 12:7-9, 13:4-6; Zech 4:1-10; Joel 2:28-31

III. The fulfillment of Righteousness and Humble/Afflicted circumstances in the ministry of Christ

A. In His Birth

- Born of poor parents instead of an established royal family Luke 2:22-24
- Born in an animal manger instead of a king’s palace Luke 2:4-7
- Born under persecution by a ruthless oppressor, leading to a refugee status Luke 2:13-18

B. In His Development

- Raised in a frontier town on the southern edge of Zebulun, overlooking a desert plain (not at the center of power) Matthew 2:19-23 cf. John 1:43-46
 - Raised without formal theological education Luke 2:41ff, 4:20ff
- C. In his ministry Jesus associates with the “humble circumstances” of Israel’s journey
- The wilderness experience Matthew 4
 - Homeless Matthew 8:20
 - Supported by “women” Luke 8:1-3
 - Associating with the “dregs” of society Luke 5:27-32
 - Focusing on the marginalized Luke 7:18-23
 - Refusing to “broadcast” His ministry in order to keep close to the broken Matthew 12:15-21
 - Inviting others into His meek and humble heart Matthew 11:25-30
- D. In His death and resurrection
- Enduring the humiliations of unjust trials and the indignities of abuse from unjust authorities - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Psalm 22
 - Crucified between two thieves, naked and exposed, ridiculed even in His death - Lk 23:32-43
 - At His resurrection, permitting the oppressors to malign His authority - Matthew 28:11-15

IV. The Call to Humility/Humble Circumstances for the New Testament Church

- A. Mary as the humble servant – Luke 1:46,47 (cf Hannah - I Samuel 2)
- B. The Beatitudes - Luke 6:20-36
- C. The Disciples - oppressor and oppressed; common fisherman and poor zealots - Matthew 10:5-10

D. The church in Acts and the Epistles

- Acts 1:4 - wait for the power of the spirit
- Acts 2-4 - political, socio-economic weakness
- Acts 3:6 - “silver and gold I do not have...”
- Acts 8:1ff - the persecuted, weak church becomes the paradigm - I Peter 1:1-7, 2:9-12, 4:12ff; James 1:1,9-11

1. The paradigm applied: Corinth

I Corinthians 1:18-31; II Corinthians 12: 7-10

2. The anti-paradigm: Laodicea

Revelation 3:7-22 Philadelphia vs. Laodicea

V. Major Biblical-Theological themes on God’s commitment to Humility/Humble circumstances

- A. The power is clearly of God and with that comes the freedom to not be driven by anxious fears of to reduce the work of God to humanly manageable terms

Deuteronomy 8; Luke 4; Acts 2

- B. Boasting in human strength is removed and therefore the occasion to oppress

Romans 3:27ff; James 4:1-12; I Corinthians 1, cf Jeremiah 9:23,24

- C. Liberty in generosity is increased

Exodus 20:2- leads into 21:1ff; Deuteronomy 10:1ff ; II Corinthians 8:1-4

- D. Compassion and justice are real because they are coming from a vulnerable position vs. Paternalism that comes from a position of perceived superiority and strength.

Deuteronomy 9: 4-6

Romans 3:23,24

- E. The message of salvation by grace, as a gift, is clearly reinforced

Genesis 17:17, 18:12, 21:1-7; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

VI. Implications for ministry

- A. We expect the real work of the kingdom to involve our being led into humble circumstances

Romans 8:17-18; Philippians 2:10, 3:10-11; see esp. 1 Cor 4:8-15

- B. We do not seek to shift the paradigm to building “humanly sustainable Systems of ministry”

Becomes oppressive/ineffective to move with the real needs of people because ministry is questioned /measured by sustainability

The more bureaucratic we become the less responsive to needs because the multiplicity of organizational rules actually replaces the need for dynamic wisdom from the Holy Spirit in applying general biblical principles.

In the end we become protective of the old wineskin - i.e. protect institutions for the institution’s sake

- C. We freely approach DEEP needs of ministry with Humble Acts of kindness and love

Luke 6

- D. We look for God’s Blessings to go beyond what we can “control” - Acts 8; Matthew 14

**"POWER IS MADE PERFECT IN WEAKNESS"
(2 COR. 12:9): A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF
STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS**

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*Caspian knelt and kissed the Lion's paw.
"Welcome, Prince," said Aslan. "Do you feel yourself sufficient to take up
the Kingship of Narnia?"
"I—I don't think I do, Sir," said Caspian. "I'm only a kid."
"Good," said Aslan. "If you had felt yourself sufficient, it would have been
a proof that you were not."*

—C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*

INTRODUCTION¹

At the pinnacle of a letter written to a church that was magnetically drawn to all that is outwardly impressive, Paul declares, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).² This paradoxical claim is the literary climax and hermeneutical key to Paul's second canonical letter to the church at Corinth.³ More broadly, though, it also crystallizes a pervasive though deeply counterintuitive theme that runs through all of Scripture. This essay aims, in broad contours, to show this. Specifically, we will show that the biblical pattern of God's redemptive activity is not

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² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

³ See, e.g., Hans Dieter Betz, "Eine Christus-Aretologie bei Paulus (2 Kor 12,7–10)," *ZTK* 66 (1969): 288–90; Hans-Georg Sundermann, *Der schwache Apostel und die Kraft der Rede: eine rhetorische Analyse von 2 Kor 10–13*, *Europäische Hochschulschriften* 575 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), 219; Margaret E. Thrall, *2 Corinthians 8–13: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 871.

one of selecting those most qualified when granting salvation⁴ and employing humans in his redeeming purposes, or even of indifference as to natural human qualification, but of deliberately saving and using those who are transparently most disqualified—as long as this weakness is acknowledged.

This paradoxical prerequisite to God's favor can be seen primarily individually but also corporately and, in what is both climactic and paradigmatic from the perspective of the New Testament, christologically. By a broad sketch of salvation history,⁵ tracing the theme of strength through weakness through the Bible, we will note the way divine favor comes to those who acknowledge, rather than seek to overcome, their weakness. This sketch will be broad and necessarily cursory; what follows is not microscopic exegesis but panoramic biblical theology.⁶

Three initial clarifications must be given before moving on. First, by "paradoxical" I mean unexpected or counterintuitive or upside down or against natural anticipations—what Jonathan Edwards called "self-contrary."⁷ We have in mind precisely what Webster's says in defining a paradox as "a tenet or proposition contrary to received opinion; something seemingly absurd, yet true in fact; a statement or phenomenon apparently at variance with or in opposition to established

⁴ We use the word inclusively here to speak of saving that is both circumstantial (e.g., from disease or physical danger) and spiritual (e.g., from hell or punishment for sin).

⁵ This phrase is used here in the same sense as by Anthony Hoekema, who defines "salvation history" (*Heilsgeschichte*) as "the view that God has revealed himself in history through a series of redemptive acts, at the center of which is the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and by means of which he brings salvation to his people" (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994], 301). See also Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History*, trans. Sidney G. Sowers (London: SCM, 1967), 74–78; Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation-Historical Fallacy? Re-Assessing the History of New Testament Interpretation* (Leiden: Deo, 2004), 3–4.

⁶ "Biblical theology" has a wide range of potential meanings; here I have in mind reflection on the Bible that traces a theological (i.e., having to do with God and his activity in the world) theme through the canon and the overarching story found therein, culminating supremely in Christ. Cf. D. A. Carson, "New Testament Theology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 797–814; Brian S. Rosner, "Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 3–11.

⁷ Jonathan Edwards, "Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God," in *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 114.

principles yet demonstrably true.”⁸ Second, “weakness” is used as broadly as possible in this essay, having in view both natural weakness (such as disadvantages resulting from one’s birth or intellectual capacity) as well as moral weakness (sin). It will become clear as we progress that the terms “strength” and “weakness” are being used in an elastic way that goes well beyond what the results of a strict lexical search for “strength” and “weakness” would produce. Third, by “divine favor” we refer to both God’s (objective) pardoning and his (subjective) empowering—both “getting in” and “staying in.”⁹

We proceed, first, by sprinting through the whole canon, noting instances of this paradoxical dimension to God’s dealings with people, dividing Scripture into four general sections: Pentateuch and historical books, poetry and prophets, the four Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament. Second, we articulate the climactic paradox of strength through weakness, involving three specific ways in which Christ forms the ultimate instance and theologically integrative center point of the motif of strength through weakness.

BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

Pentateuch and Historical Books

The first book of the Bible unambiguously establishes the intercanonical motif of strength through weakness. In Genesis 12, Abram is chosen as the one individual (cf. Isa. 51:2) through whom God will rescue the world—a 75-year-old pagan from Ur who twice lacked the courage to ensure the well-being of his own wife.¹⁰ The reader soon discovers that Abram’s unlikely selection is not an aberration in God’s dealings with humanity but a consistent pattern. Time and again, in an upending of ancient cultural primogeniture patterns, it is the younger sons in Abraham’s line who are consistently favored over the older—a pattern already established in Abel’s more warmly received offering than his older brother Cain’s (Gen. 4:1–5), as well as in the choice of the younger

⁸ Webster’s Twentieth-Century Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Publisher’s Guild, 1940).

⁹ Expressions made famous in NT scholarship by E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977); see, e.g., 17, 424.

¹⁰ See J. Gordon McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology: Genesis–Kings* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), 48. Some detect the paradoxical notion that strength comes through weakness as early as Gen. 3, as Eve is given her name, with its allusion to *life*, in the immediate wake of the fall and the onset of *death* (v. 20); e.g. Derek Kidner, *Genesis, TOTC* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 72; Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1988), 37.

Seth over the older Cain as the one through whom God’s promises are realized (cf. 4:25).¹¹ Isaac is subsequently chosen over his older brother Ishmael, Jacob over his older brother Esau.¹² Jacob himself was not only inferior in age but would go on to live up to his name (which means “he deceives”), stealing first his brother’s birthright (25:29–34) and then his brother’s blessing (27:1–40). Yet he was the one through whom the promise traveled—though only after God had permanently weakened him (32:21–32).¹³ Of Jacob’s twelve sons, it is the fourth (Judah) and eleventh (Joseph) who ultimately receive unique favor, and the 13 chapters that close Genesis narrate the way young Joseph’s rise to power comes through a series of devastating sufferings and setbacks.¹⁴ As Genesis closes, Ephraim receives Jacob’s blessing rather than his older brother Manasseh (48:13–19).¹⁵

God’s counterintuitive ways appear not only in the favored males but also in the favored females. It is “weak-eyed” Leah, whom Laban deceitfully pawned off, and not beautiful Rachel (Gen. 29:17), who bears Judah, the tribe from which the Messiah will come. It is Leah, furthermore, who is brought into deep fellowship with God, evident in her concluding comment after bearing Judah: “This time I will praise the LORD” (Gen. 29:35).

Exodus opens with the depressing account of the enslaving of God’s people, and here too we find hints of God’s upside down ways. Contrary to what one would expect, the more Israel was oppressed, “the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad” (1:12).¹⁶ And the man chosen to bring Israel out of Egypt was not, it would seem, the barrel-chested Charlton Heston conjured up in modern imagination: in Moses’ ordination service in Exodus 3–4 he offers one excuse after another, each valid in its own right, for why he was unqualified and too weak for the

¹¹ Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 20–21, 40–41; Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 113. The repeated choice of younger sons is picked up by Paul in Romans 9:6–13; see esp. Frank Thielman, “Unexpected Mercy: Echoes of a Biblical Motif in Romans 9–11,” *SJT* 47 (1994): 176–79.

¹² Mark G. Brett needlessly plays down the consistent selection of younger sons (*Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* [London: Routledge, 2000], 83); better is Judah Goldin, “The Youngest Son or Where Does Genesis 38 Belong,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 27–44. Cf. Jub. 28:6.

¹³ See Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 92–94.

¹⁴ See Goldin, “Youngest Son,” 37; Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 81–82.

¹⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 105–7; cf. 278–79.

¹⁶ Cf. idem, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 85, rightly suggesting that Exod. 1:12 picks up the command to multiply and fill the earth in Gen. 1–2.

task God was setting before him. Yet in the ensuing narrative, it is weak Moses through whom God's strength is channeled in overcoming powerful Pharaoh.

Nestled into the curses of Leviticus 26 is God's threat that if his people disobey, their "strength shall be spent in vain" (v. 20)—hinting at what is made more explicit elsewhere, that it is not human strength but self-divesting trust in God that ultimately produces fruitfulness. In Numbers it is through the ridiculous speech of a donkey that God finally gets Balaam's attention (Num. 22:21–35). And a recurring theme of Deuteronomy is what Moses says to Israel in Deuteronomy 7: "The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:6–7; cf. 8:17–18; 9:4–6; 14:2). Here we find the same theme of God's attraction toward weakness put in *corporate* terms.

In Joshua it is a woman and a prostitute, Rahab, who proves to be the decisive factor in the conquering of Jericho (Josh. 2:1–24; cf. Heb 11:31, 34). In Judges it is Gideon—the least in his father's house, whose clan is the weakest in Manasseh (Judg. 6:15)—who is beating out wheat in the winepress to hide from the Midianites, to whom the Lord appears and whom he hails as a "mighty man of valor" (Judg. 6:12). A quick perusal of the commentators on this puzzling ascription shows how difficult it is to grasp the import of this greeting apart from the biblical-theological theme of strength through weakness. It is precisely Gideon's weakness, openly acknowledged without an attempt at self-resourced mitigation of this weakness, with which God's strength intersects and in which divine power ignites.¹⁷ This is evident later in the narrative when God leads Israel to victory with an army to match their leader's weakness—300 men (pared down from 10,000) with nothing but voice boxes, trumpets, and jars.

Samson is relevant here, too. Even his extraordinary human strength devolved into reckless selfishness when exercised apart from God's Spirit. Samson's great might, writes Christopher Wright, "starts innocently enough under the sign of God's blessing. But as the story proceeds, that strength gets more and more out of control. Samson's human weakness is all too visible under his superhuman strength."¹⁸ Perhaps Samson serves as an embodiment of the inverse of the theme of

¹⁷ Contra Daniel I. Block, who understands the angel's ascription "simply as a flattering address, designed to win the sympathy of the man to what he is about to tell him" (*Judges, Ruth*, NAC 6 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 260).

¹⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 41.

this essay, for it was through *strength* that he became *weak*. Still, perhaps as a foretaste of the one who would provide the deliverance none of the judges could decisively accomplish, it was in the weakness of blindness and death that Samson provided his greatest deliverance.¹⁹

In the book of Ruth we find a poor, husbandless, female foreigner to be the one through whom David and ultimately Christ himself come. Another famous woman of the Bible, Esther, is almost equally implausible on first glance as one through whom God would save his people—a woman, an orphan, and a concubine.

The narrative chronicled in 1 and 2 Samuel taps into the theme of strength through weakness in Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. When the formerly barren woman becomes pregnant, her song provides an acute picture of God's paradoxical prioritization: "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn" (1 Sam. 2:4–5).²⁰

We find strength through weakness exemplified in David, too, at various points in the Davidic narrative. The reader is first introduced to the future king—once more, the youngest son—when he is not even summoned as one of Jesse's sons upon Samuel's arrival to anoint Israel's next monarch. Later on it is the weakness of an unarmed, youthful shepherd who brings down Goliath of Gath (1 Sam. 17:1–54). "There was no sword in the hand of David," the text tellingly reminds us (v. 50). David's representative victory in the face of defeat on behalf of his cowering people foreshadows the representative victory-in-defeat later won by David's greater son.²¹ We see strength through weakness exemplified morally in David, too. Comparing his life as a whole with that of Saul clarifies the crucial difference between the two men. The distinction is not that Saul sinned and David did not; one could argue that David was the greater sinner (adultery, murder). The difference is that David acknowledged his failures, egregious though they were (e.g., Ps. 32:5; 51:1–5), while Saul consistently explained his misdemeanors away (e.g., 1 Sam. 13:11–12; 15:15, 20–21).²²

In the narratives of 1 and 2 Kings, too, weakness is strength. It is the weakness of a single despised prophet, a water-drenched altar, and a

¹⁹ Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 15–16, 136–42.

²⁰ Nicely drawn out by Walter Brueggemann, who suggests Hannah's prayer here may anticipate the later defeat of strong Goliath by weak David (*First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation Commentary [Louisville: John Knox, 1990], 18).

²¹ Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 166.

²² Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 158; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 378–79.

brief prayer that elicits consuming fire from heaven, not the 450 prophets of Baal who pray from morning till noon (1 Kings 18:20–40). Later, when the Syrians advance against Israel, “the people of Israel encamped before them like two little flocks of goats, but the Syrians filled the country” (1 Kings 20:27). Syrian boasts of strength, however (v. 28), result in a slaughter of 100,000 Syrian foot soldiers in a single day (v. 29).

The opening narratives of the Bible consistently depict human weakness as an opportunity for, not a hindrance to, accessing strength from God.²³

Poetry and Prophets

That divine strength is channeled through human weakness is evident in the poetry and prophets, too, though didactically and poetically rather than narratively. Despite coming from the mouth of Eliphaz—not a model theologian—we read in Job 5:11 that God “sets on high those who are lowly, and those who mourn are lifted to safety.” Job 5:13, a few verses later, is reiterated in 1 Corinthians 3:19: “He catches the wise in their own craftiness.” Evidently human wisdom is not as wise as it appears. In the psalms we read, “Out of the mouth of babes and infants you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger” (Ps. 8:2). What is weaker than an infant? Yet these are the very ones who, according to the psalmist, will provide triumph over God’s enemies and subdue Israel’s persecutors. Psalm 126 reads: “Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him” (Ps. 126:5–6). Here the emotionally weak wind up displaying the most intense of joys. Perhaps Psalm 138:6 provides the reason for this:

“though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar” (cf. Ps. 113:5–8).

In Proverbs we find similar upside down statements regarding strength through weakness, here expressed in terms of wise daily living. Proverbs 11:24 says, “One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.” This is a kind of *financial* strength through weakness; generosity, not hoarding, is the path to flourishing.²⁴ Proverbs 29 returns to the theme of human pride, as in Psalm 138: “One’s pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor” (Prov. 29:23).

²³ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narratives Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 3–4.

²⁴ Cf. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 216–17.

The lowliness of pride and the greatness of humility recur in Isaiah.²⁵ “The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the lofty pride of men shall be humbled, and the LORD alone will be exalted in that day” (Isa. 2:11). The flipside is that the LORD “gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength” (Isa. 40:29). Again, it is the weak who are endued with power, might, strength; Calvin connects this text with 2 Corinthians 12:9, as both passages speak of God manifesting his power in the weak.²⁶ In Isaiah 53, vindication, peace, and healing come not in conquering sin but bearing it, not in overcoming iniquities but in being crushed for them, not in slaughtering God’s enemies but in being led to the slaughter on behalf of God’s people (Isa. 52:14–53:12). And at the end of Isaiah, after reminding his people that heaven is his throne and the earth his footstool, God declares that “this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2; cf. 57:15; Ps. 51:17).²⁷

Other prophets contain similar hints of the counterintuitive nature of flourishing in a fallen world. In Jeremiah God says, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me” (Jer. 9:23–24; cf. 12:13; 24:1–8; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17).²⁸ In Ezekiel we read: “Thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted” (Ezek. 21:26).²⁹ Hosea teaches us that Israel’s increased strength of numbers proved morally counterproductive: “The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame” (Hos. 4:7). Micah 5:2 identifies the backwoods town of Bethlehem (“too little to be among the clans of Judah”) and not the city of David or Jericho as the source of the coming king.³⁰ Habakkuk closes (3:17–19)

²⁵ See John Barton, “Ethics in the Book of Isaiah,” in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, VTSup 70/1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 73–74.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, Vol. 3, trans. William Pringle (repr; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 237.

²⁷ Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–2008), 4:162. A pervasive theme of Isaiah is that Israel’s ultimate security is found in trusting Yahweh rather than seeking shelter under the wings of the political superpowers of the day.

²⁸ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 687; cf. idem, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 132.

²⁹ This text contains interpretive ambiguity; for discussion see Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, WBC 29 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 21, who translates, “Up with the low and down with the high!” (18).

³⁰ See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:649.

with a moving affirmation that, as Bavinck puts it, "one is blessed whose God is YHWH, even in the most dreadful adversities."³¹ Would Habakkuk have been able to say that "GOD, the Lord, is my strength" (Hab. 3:19) *apart* from the impending calamity?³² And viewing the prophets collectively, finally, it is time and again the weakness of a small remnant that will usher in a new day in Israel (Isa. 10:19–22; 37:31–32; Jer. 50:20; Ezek. 11:13–17; Zeph. 2:7–9; Zech. 8:1–13).³³

Gospels³⁴

In the Gospels this paradox is ratcheted up to the next level of clarity and pervasiveness. Concerning the Old Testament prophecies seen in the Gospels as pointing to Christ, C. H. Dodd concluded that "it is easy to see how for a first-century reader it all worked out as an elaboration and enrichment of the same broad plot of suffering and humiliation followed by triumph through the [*sic*] grace of God"—in other words, the same broad plot of weakness being a catalyst for, not an obstacle to, real strength.³⁵

One is immediately struck by the way the genealogy of Matthew 1 includes several women—unusual enough in itself, but all the more so in that it is not an all-star line-up of, say, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah (all of whom were in the line of Christ and therefore legitimate candidates for inclusion) but Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary—all of whom were, for various reasons, strikingly implausible

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4:601–2.

³² It is, writes Calvin, "as though the prophet had said, 'God will be a strength to me; though I am weak in myself, I shall yet be strong in him'" (*The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Prophet Habakkuk*, trans. John Owen [repr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 176–77).

³³ See Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 190–91.

³⁴ For the sake of space this paper will not deal with the literature of Second Temple Judaism, though one does find occasional understanding of strength through weakness; see, e.g., *T. Judah* 25:4; *Judith* 9:11; 2 *Macc.* 6:12–17; 7:36–38; 1 *Enoch* 103:9–15; 2 *Enoch* 66:6; 1QH 9:24–27; *Life of Moses* 1:67–69; *Jewish War* 7:419. There may be identifiable reasons, however, why intertestamental Judaism would not have grasped the fundamental biblical paradox of strength through weakness—see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 53–54.

³⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Old Testament in the New* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1963), 19; cf. *idem*, "The Old Testament in the New," in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 174–75. See also William A. Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 94.

participants in the lineage of Christ, and some of whom bring to mind forgettable episodes in Israel's checkered history.³⁶

The Lukan genealogy of Christ does not include women, but the notion of strength through weakness has a clear social parallel in Luke's ubiquitous inclusion of outsiders to the exclusion of insiders, a theme common throughout the third Gospel. In Luke 1 Zechariah is implicitly compared and contrasted with Mary. Both are visited by an angel, told they will have their first child, and have significant reason to doubt such a statement. Yet Zechariah, the quintessential insider (old, male, priest), responds precisely as Mary, the quintessential outsider (young, female, poor), would be expected to respond (Luke 1:18), and Mary responds as Zechariah ought to have (Luke 1:34). It is not surprising, then, that in an intercanonical echo of Hannah's prayer from 1 Samuel 2,³⁷ Mary prays: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away" (Luke 1:51–53).

This surprising role reversal is developed throughout Luke, as the socially weak—tax collectors, prostitutes, Gentiles, Samaritans, women, children, "sinners," the poor—are included in the kingdom, and the socially strong—teachers of the law, scribes, Pharisees, the dutifully religious, the rich—are excluded.³⁸ To cite a few examples: the poor, hungry, and despised are blessed, while the rich, satisfied, and socially accepted are under woe (Luke 6:20–26); a disabled woman appears to be in and a synagogue ruler out (Luke 13:10–17); those who are invited end up rejected, while those whom one would never expect to be invited are "compelled" and included (Luke 14:7–24); the younger son—as so often in the Genesis narrative—is welcomed and the older son (appears to be?) alienated (Luke 15:11–32); the poor man winds up in heaven and the rich man tormented in hell (Luke 16:19–31); of the ten lepers cleansed, it's the one outsider (a Samaritan) who returns to render thanks (Luke 17:11–19); the miserable tax collector, not the dutiful Pharisee, goes home justified (Luke 18:9–14).³⁹

³⁶ See Edwin D. Freed, "The Women in Matthew's Genealogy," *JSNT* 29 (1987): 3–19; *idem*, *The Stories of Jesus' Birth: A Critical Introduction* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 31–52.

³⁷ So Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, NSBT 15 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 233.

³⁸ See Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner's, 1966), 97–116; I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 137–44. Cf. Lawrence M. Wills, *Not God's People: Insiders and Outsiders in the Biblical World* (Plymouth, Eng.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 101–32.

³⁹ The counterintuitive nature of God's ways as expressed in Jesus' parables is repeatedly noted in Helmut Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the*

Similar reversals, though not as sharply socially cast, are seen in Mark. For instance, in two consecutive pericopes, Mark contrasts James and John with blind Bartimaeus. Both James and John on the one hand and Bartimaeus on the other ask Jesus to fulfill a request, and to both Jesus responds, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:36, 51). Yet James and John ask for glory, Bartimaeus for mercy. Mark is showing us that James and John were physically seeing but spiritually blind; Bartimaeus was physically blind but spiritually seeing (note the similar reversal of John 9:39–41⁴⁰). James and John were operating out of a "strength through strength" mindset ("Are you able to drink the cup...?" And they said to him, "We are able!" [δυνάμεθα; Mark 10:38–39]).

Stepping back and viewing the Gospels with a wider lens, one finds scattered throughout all four accounts numerous aphorisms from the mouth of Jesus that pithily crystallize the strength-through-weakness motif illustrated narratively early on in the Old Testament and poetically later on. It is in losing our lives that we find them (Matt. 10:39; cf. Luke 17:33); humbling oneself like a child is true greatness (Matt. 18:1–4; cf. Luke 9:23–24, 48); the last will be first and the first last (Matt. 19:30; 20:16; cf. Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30); those seeking to be great must serve others (Matt. 20:26–28;⁴¹ cf. Mark 9:35; 10:43–45); the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a tiny seed yet providing the largest, most shady branches (Mark 4:30–32); the humble will be exalted and the self-exalting humbled (Luke 14:11; cf. 16:15; 18:14); it is the grain that falls into the ground and dies that bears much fruit (John 12:24–25).⁴²

To be sure, each of these statements must be appropriately literarily situated. We must beware flattening out the biblical text in an attempt to detect a common theme. None of the texts just quoted, moreover, uses the words "strong" or "weak." Yet each text taps into the notion that strength, fruitfulness, and life are found not in taking such things up but in laying them down; not in scrambling to amass self-generated worth

Parables of Jesus, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), e.g., 26–27, 31–33, 36, 38, 117, 126–29, 133. See also Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 343.

⁴⁰ See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 166, 224–25. Luther comments on this text: "Look, what an upside down judgment that is for Christ to make!" (LW 51:37).

⁴¹ See the discussion of strength through weakness based on this text in Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844), 220–23.

⁴² See Martin Luther, "Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows," in LW 44:294; cf. idem, "Treatise on Good Works," in LW 44:41–42; also Edwyn Hoskins and Noel Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (London: Faber, 1958), 111–14.

but in putting that impulse to death;⁴³ not in exercising innate strength but in acknowledging weakness; not in self-exaltation but in self-humbling; not in self-resourced triumphalism but in self-denying crucifixion.⁴⁴ It is the smallest, weakest seed that produces the greatest, strongest shade.

This paradox, however, is more than a scattered theme in the Gospels. At times we can see this principle providing an organizing structure in the deliberate coordination of successive pericopes. We take one example.

In Matthew 18–20, in the course of Jesus' describing life in the kingdom, numerous questioners come to him, each asking the same fundamental question: What's the least I can do? What is the minimum required of me?⁴⁵ Peter asks this with respect to forgiveness (Matt. 18:21–35), the Pharisees with respect to marriage (Matt. 19:1–12), and the rich young man with respect to morality (Matt. 19:16–22). How does Jesus respond to this cost-benefit mindset that has infected even his own disciples? He answers by upending the world's understanding of qualification and disqualification for life in the kingdom. This is facilitated by Matthew's linking of four consecutive pericopes in Matthew 19–20. First, children are prohibited from coming to Jesus (Matt. 19:13–15). Second, a rich man asks Jesus about how to attain eternal life (Matt. 19:16–22). Third, Peter and the disciples ask about heavenly rewards for their willingness to do precisely what the rich man refused to do (Matt. 19:23–30). Fourth, Jesus tells a parable about workers hired at staggered times throughout the day yet all paid a day's wage (Matt. 20:1–16).

We tend to read these as disconnected stories strung together by Matthew much like a builder laying bricks—the order in which one lays them matters little so long as they all get in there. But Matthew's strategy

⁴³ Cf. G. C. Berkouwer: "Faith directed only to divine mercy, excludes all worthiness. Paradoxical though it may be, it is in this exclusion of worthiness that the worth of true faith is brought out" (*Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954], 189).

⁴⁴ Here we bear in mind, then, James Barr's salutary reminder that instances of a word do not exhaust the presence of a concept (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], esp. 206–62). Cf. Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 23.

⁴⁵ Cf. C. S. Lewis: "Our temptation is to look eagerly for the minimum that will be accepted. We are in fact very like honest but reluctant taxpayers. We approve of an income tax in principle. We make our returns truthfully. But we dread a rise in the tax. We are very careful to pay no more than is necessary. And we hope—we very ardently hope—that after we have paid it there will still be enough left to live on" ("A Slip of the Tongue," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* [New York: Touchstone, 1996], 140).

is instead more like that of a traffic worker placing a series of road signs along the highway (one says "Boston: 80 miles," another "Boston: 40 miles")—not only is each necessary, but they are placed in a deliberate order and are all pointing to the same reality (Boston). These four stories in Matthew are connected by a single thread that is at the heart of how life in the kingdom works: in the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing you are weak, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking you are strong. In each passage, a central character assumes one has to "qualify" with some kind of strength—strength of age, of obedience, of sacrifice, of labor—to gain some apposite result.

1. The disciples thought children needed to qualify with strength of age in order to gain Jesus' attention.
2. The rich young man thought he needed to qualify with strength of obedience in order to gain eternal life.
3. Peter and company thought they had to qualify with strength of sacrifice in order to gain a reward.
4. The earlier-hired workers thought all employees had to qualify with strength of labor in order to gain a day's wage.

The root mistake in each case is the intuitive assumption that some kind of strength, or self-generated qualification—social, ethical, sacrificial, or economic—provides corresponding approval in the kingdom. Each time Jesus turns this assumption upside down.⁴⁶

What is exemplified in the narratives of the early Old Testament and sporadically affirmed in the poetry and prophets of the later Old Testament is explicitly amplified in the Gospels: awareness of weakness—when self-divestingly acknowledged—channels, rather than inhibits, real strength.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Cf. Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 39, 152, 217–29, 328–29; Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribner's, 1971), 117–21.

⁴⁷ On this theme in the Gospels see also Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 19–20. R. T. France and John W. Wenham helpfully note the way Jesus' own messianic self-understanding was formed by the OT motif of strength through weakness, especially as seen in Isa. 53, Dan. 7, and Zech. 9–14; see France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (repr.; Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 79–80, 106, 109, 117; Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972), 60.

Epistles and Revelation

In moving to the rest of the New Testament, this paradox is even further heightened. In Romans 4:4–5 righteousness is the result of explicitly not working but rather trusting him who justifies the *ungodly*. In Romans 8:37 Paul says it is "in all these [hardships]" that "we are more than conquerors." The apostle's suffering, he tells the Ephesians, is their glory (Eph. 3:13). The man chosen to lead the church at Ephesus was, according to clues discernible in Paul's letters to him, young (1 Tim. 4:12), sickly (1 Tim. 5:23), and timid (2 Tim. 1:7). In the litany of weak but faith-filled saints in Hebrews 11—much of which could conceptually qualify for portraying strength through weakness—the words themselves are used in verse 34 in describing those who "were made strong out of weakness." James reminds his readers that God has "chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (James 2:5).⁴⁸ In James 4:10, echoing the words of Jesus, James enjoins his readers: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (cf. Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). And Jonathan Edwards, among others, has drawn attention to the way Christ is presented in Revelation 5 in both the weakest and strongest of images at the same time—as a lamb and a lion.⁴⁹

Viewing the theme of strength through weakness once again *corporately*, a frequent emphasis of the New Testament as a whole is the favor shown to Gentiles, often juxtaposed with Jewish failure. Throughout Acts, for instance, Jewish hard-heartedness toward Paul's preaching is characteristically followed up with Gentile reception of it. Frank Thielman thus rightly notes that Paul's argument in Romans 9:6–13 "shows that God's choice to include Gentiles within a newly constituted Israel is not as inconsistent with scripture as it at first seems—that God has in the past conferred his blessing on the least likely candidate, on the weak rather than on the strong."⁵⁰

While it might be fruitful to pursue other more implicit occurrences of strength through weakness in the New Testament,⁵¹ we hurry on to

⁴⁸ See Douglas J. Moo's particularly apt comments in *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 108.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "The Excellency of Christ," in *Sermons and Discourses 1734–1738*, Vol. 19 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 560–94. Cf. Rev. 12:10–11, where the saints' suffering, rooted in Christ's suffering, is the means by which Satan is conquered. G. K. Beale draws attention to other surprising reversals in Revelation in "The Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," in *Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts*, 270–71.

⁵⁰ Thielman, "Unexpected Mercy," 178.

⁵¹ J. R. Daniel Kirk has recently detected the paradox elsewhere in Romans (*Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God* [Grand Rapids:

the place where the motif is most clearly explicated—the Corinthian correspondence. The paradox is conspicuous in 1 Corinthians 1–4, as many have noted.⁵² After chapter four, however, Paul takes up questions apparently posed to him by the Corinthians—marriage, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, and so on. The paradox thus becomes largely muted in the rest of the letter. But in the early chapters, Paul drives home the upside down ways of God. Perhaps 1 Corinthians 1:27–28 crystallizes the theme of these chapters best: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 3:18–19; 4:10; Ignatius, *Eph.*, 18.1–2).⁵³

In these four chapters, unlike the soundings taken from Jesus' teaching, we consistently find the explicit language of “strength” and “weakness.” To a church absorbing the surrounding *Zeitgeist* rather than confronting it with the upside down message of the gospel, Paul seeks to expose the Corinthians' subtle capitulation to worldly notions of strength and weakness. Corinth was famous for lusting after wealth, religious power, athletic glory, and impressive speech⁵⁴—in a word, strength. The apostle's strategy is to turn this mindset upside down by showing the Corinthians that true strength and glory are found in the very weakness and suffering so despised in their social context.⁵⁵

Eerdmans, 2008], 210; cf. *ibid.*, 213). Stephen Westerholm notes the “paradox” of Rom. 9:30–10:4 in “Paul and the Law in Romans 9–11,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 226–27; cf. Martin Luther, “Letter to Wenceslas Link,” in *LW* 49:22. Carl N. Toney (*Paul's Inclusive Ethic*, WUNT 2/252 [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008]) examines the language of “strong” and “weak” in Paul; while he naturally focuses on Rom. 14–15 and 1 Cor. 8–10, note the discussion of divine strength and human weakness on pp. 74–80.

⁵² E.g., Erhardt Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr: Studien zur paulinischen Christologie*, FRLANT 90 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 142–69, 282–328; Anthony T. Hanson, *The Paradox of the Cross in the Thought of St Paul*, JSNTSup 17 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), esp. 25–37; Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), *passim*.

⁵³ See Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, trans. Paul P. Levertoff (London: SPCK, 1961), 155–57; cf. 200; also Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, 71–72. Note the way C. H. Dodd connects 1 Cor. 1:27–28 with the OT promises in *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1952), 112.

⁵⁴ See Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19–102.

⁵⁵ Paul also speaks of strength through weakness at the very end of 1 Corinthians—the old body “is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown

Whereas in 1 Corinthians this counterintuitive dynamic predominates only in the first four chapters, it pervades 2 Corinthians from start to finish. We might say that whereas from chapter 5 onward in 1 Corinthians Paul addresses the *fruit* of the Corinthian mistake, in 2 Corinthians he addresses the *root* of the Corinthian mistake. Second Corinthians deals with the disease itself, the symptoms of which have popped up in various ways in 1 Corinthians 5–16. Tim Savage's monograph hints at this, but focuses on chapters 3–4 of 2 Corinthians.⁵⁶ A more comprehensive study could identify how Paul employs the principle of strength through weakness throughout the epistle⁵⁷: in chapter 1, the strength of comfort comes through the weakness of affliction (2 Cor. 1:3–7); in chapter 2, victory comes through captivity (2:12–17); in chapter 3, sufficiency through insufficiency (3:1–6); in chapter 4, life through death (4:7–15); in chapter 5, eternal dwellings through bodily destruction (5:1–5); in chapter 6, blessing through suffering (6:3–10);⁵⁸ in chapter 7, salvation through grief (7:2–10); in chapter 8, abundance through poverty (8:1–2, 9, 14); in chapter 9, receiving through giving (9:6–8, 11); in chapter 10, commendation through denigration (10:10–18); in chapter 11, boasting through hardship (11:16–30). Each time a certain strength comes *through*, not *despite*, a corresponding weakness.⁵⁹

in weakness; it is raised in power” (15:43; cf. v. 36). Gerald G. O'Collins rightly points out, however, that the thrust of 1 Cor. 15:43 is somewhat different than that of 2 Cor. 12:9–10; in 1 Cor. 15 the weakness leads to a subsequent manifestation of power, while in 2 Cor. 12 the two are simultaneous; it is a power in weakness (“Power Made Perfect in Weakness: 2 Cor. 12:9–10,” *CBQ* 33 [1971]: 531, 536).

⁵⁶ Savage, *Power through Weakness*. See also Sze-kar Wan, *Power in Weakness: Conflict and Rhetoric in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000). Wenhua Shi's recent monograph covers both Corinthian letters, but, again, fixes on only certain key passages: 1 Cor. 1:18–31; 2:1–5; 4:8–13; 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:23–33 (*Paul's Message of the Cross as Body Language*, WUNT 2/254 [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008], *passim*); so too John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBLDS 99 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), focusing on 1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:8–9; 6:4–10.

⁵⁷ See Craig F. Evans, “The New Testament in the Making,” in *Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to Jerome* (ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 246. Cf. also Karl A. Plank, *Paul and the Irony of Affliction* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 4–5, 16.

⁵⁸ Cf. the strikingly similar language to 2 Cor. 6:3–10 in the early *Epistle to Diognetus* 5:4–16.

⁵⁹ Helpfully noted by Alister E. McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

Yet the clearest example of strength through weakness is in chapter 12, as Paul reflects on his “thorn in the flesh,” “a messenger of Satan” (2 Cor. 12:7). Despite pleading three times for its removal, the Lord’s answer is: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). Paul defiantly announces, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (12:9). Why? “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10).⁶⁰ Real strength flooded his life not by circumventing or overcoming weakness but in it. Human weakness and suffering, let it be said clearly, are not ends in themselves⁶¹—hardship exists neither in the first two nor the final two chapters of the Bible, neither in Eden nor the New Eden. Yet such unpleasant experiences are primary channels of God’s strength in between these two stages of glory. “[T]he grace and power of God interlock with human lives at the point of mortal weakness.”⁶²

The above survey of 2 Corinthians omitted chapter 13. This is because the final chapter of this epistle brings us to the foundation for all that has been said in this paper.

CHRIST: THE CLIMACTIC PARADOX

Christ “is not weak in dealing with you,” Paul says in closing 2 Corinthians, “but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God” (2 Cor. 13:3–4).⁶³ Everything

⁶⁰ Note Philo’s interpretation of God’s words to Moses, to be passed on to the Hebrews in their suffering in Egypt: “do not lose heart; your weakness is your strength” (*Life of Moses*, 1:69). Paul, however, does not see human weakness funneling into human strength but human weakness as the channel for *divine* strength.

⁶¹ H. H. Drake Williams makes this mistake (*The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture Within 1 Cor. 1:18–3:23*, AGJU 49 [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 153–54).

⁶² Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 179. See also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.2.10–11; Adolf Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 188; idem, *Paulus, der Bote Jesus: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 669; Petrus J. Gräbe, *The Power of God in Paul’s Letters*, 2nd ed., WUNT 2/123 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008), 144–49. Hans Windisch’s comment “je mehr Leiden, desto mehr Kraft,” though largely true, is overly formulaic (*Der zweite Korintherbrief* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1924], 392).

⁶³ On the christologically-rooted paradox of this text, see Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 248; Kenneth Grayston, *Dying, We Live: A New Enquiry into the Death of Christ in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 67; Gräbe, *Power of God*, 154–56.

said in this essay thus far is true as far as it goes, yet remains hollow or unlocked or unconsummated if it is not rooted in Christ. For Christ is the ultimate example of someone who experienced strength through weakness. In three critical ways—one of degree, one of union, and one of vicariousness—Christ embodies and fulfills this biblical-theological theme.

First, Christ experienced both weakness and strength to a superlative degree. On the one hand, it is impossible to fathom the profound weakness to which God the Son was subjected.⁶⁴ He became a man, subject to all the frailty and limitations that this involved with the exception of sin. And Christ’s weakness plummeted to its lowest depths in the gruesome shame of the cross.⁶⁵ On the other hand, the exaltation of Christ to God’s right hand exhibits a “strength” of status and glory as high in degree as his humiliation was low. Richard Bauckham, for instance, has brought out in various writings the shocking way in which the man Jesus was included by early Christians within the divine identity, an identity unswervingly cordoned off by Second Temple Jews as belonging to Yahweh and Yahweh alone.⁶⁶ Not only was Jesus divine, but *as a man* he was highly exalted to a superlative position of “strength” (cf. Acts 3:13; Rom. 1:3–4; 5:15, 17; 1 Cor. 15:21–22; 1 Tim. 2:5).

Noteworthy in all this is that it was *through* his weakness that Christ was ultimately glorified. His shame was ultimately the means, not an obstacle, to his honor. Jesus “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* God has highly exalted him . . .” (Phil. 2:8–9; cf. Heb. 2:14⁶⁷). “The supreme paradox of the Christian gospel,” writes Vern Poythress of Christ’s death, “is that victory comes through apparent defeat.”⁶⁸ Let us frame the point in biblical-theological terms. Certainly Jews were aware of the theme of a lowly suffering servant from Isaiah 40–55. What would have shocked them was to overlay this role with that of the triumphant Son of Man of

⁶⁴ Cf. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 204.

⁶⁵ See Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility,” in *LW* 44:140. On the shame of crucifixion in the ancient world see David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, WUNT 2/244 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008), 252–54; cf. Shi, *Paul’s Message of the Cross*, 20–52.

⁶⁶ Bauckham has argued this christological point from John (*The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 239–52), Paul (*Jesus and the God of Israel*, 197–210), Hebrews (*ibid.*, 233–53), and Revelation (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 54–65).

⁶⁷ See Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 116; Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 244.

⁶⁸ Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 207. Cf. Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 38; Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 115.

Daniel 7 and the eternal Davidic king of 2 Samuel 7 (along with a handful of messianic psalms). The weakness of the suffering servant and the strength of the Son of Man and Son of David intersected in a single individual.⁶⁹

Christ's weakness and strength are not only to be coolly appreciated from a distance, however, but also personally embodied, for while Christ is in a class by himself in the *degree* of his weakness and strength, Christians do follow him in *kind*. This brings us to the second way in which Christ climactically sums up the paradox of strength through weakness. Jesus not only bore a cross but instructed his followers to take up their own crosses and follow him, in what Michael Gorman has recently reiterated as "cruciformity" or "cruciform power," since it is rooted in Christ's own experience of power through the weakness of crucifixion.⁷⁰ Graham Tomlin, in a fascinating monograph that examines the cross in the thought of Paul, Luther, and Pascal, writes of the way God chooses "inferior people" just as he chose to work through "the crucified Messiah," leading Tomlin to discuss "the paradigmatic nature of the cross."⁷¹ Jesus experienced strength through weakness; united to him, so do we. Christ is not only the definitive instantiation of this motif but also its paradigmatic pioneer, its ἀρχηγός (Heb. 2:10; 12:2). Believers are united to Christ in both (the weakness of) his death and (the strength of) his resurrection (Rom. 6:4–8; cf. 8:17; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:29; Col. 2:12; 2 Tim. 2:11; 1 Peter 2:21).⁷²

⁶⁹ See Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983), 95. Cf. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 216, 327; Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul and Jesus: Origin and General Character of Paul's Preaching of Christ*, trans. David H. Freedman (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 29–33; Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 54, 244.

⁷⁰ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 25–34, 121–23; cf. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 268–303. These references should not be taken as an endorsement of Gorman's writings; his explication of *justification* in terms of believers' "cruciformity" is especially troubling. See Paul Barnett's comments in *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 179n39.

⁷¹ Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 100, 278 (note the way Tomlin roots the paradigmatic nature of the cross in the OT on p. 101). Cf. Schlatter, *History of the Christ*, 287, 292–93; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 283.

⁷² See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 206–14; Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 44–52.

We have said, then, that Christ was superlatively weak and superlatively strong, and we have connected that weakness and strength to Christian discipleship. What we have not yet uncovered is the foundation for such discipleship. This brings us to the third point, and moves us from the subjective to the objective. For not only do believers participate in Christ's weakness and strength (with respect to frailty and suffering), but in the great exchange, Christ's strength has become ours and our weakness has become his (with respect to sin and righteousness; Isa. 53:12; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18).⁷³ Not only do we go down in order to go up, as Christ did; he went down so that we, in the most ultimate sense, need not. Christ's vicarious weakness rescues weak people (cf. Rom. 5:6). He became weak, bearing the wrath we deserved, so that our natural weaknesses might not dictate our usefulness in the kingdom, and, even more fundamentally, so that our moral weakness, once confessed, might not dictate our existence in the kingdom.⁷⁴

Earlier we addressed four consecutive pericopes in Matthew 19–20, each affirming from various angles that the key to qualifying in the kingdom is not asserting strength but acknowledging weakness. But we did not provide the foundation for why that could be true. In exploring this third way that Christ sums up the paradox, in which our condemnable moral weakness is exchanged for his freely provided strength of status, we have penetrated to that foundation. The point could be expressed in terms of the four consecutive Matthean accounts.

1. *Regarding the children being kept from Jesus' attention (Matt. 19:13–15):* weak Christians can have God's undivided attention without qualifying with age or other social prerequisites, because on the cross Jesus experienced the weakness of being rejected not only by men but by his own Father.
2. *Regarding the young man asking what he had to do to gain eternal life (Matt. 19:16–22):* weak Christians can have eternal life without qualifying with lawkeeping, because on the cross

⁷³ Cf. Morna D. Hooker's notion of "interchange" in Paul's theology: "Interchange in Christ," *JTS* 22 (1971): 349–61; idem, "Interchange in Christ and Ethics," *JSNT* 25 (1985): 5–10, 14. This third point is not meant to make the forensic (justification) more soteriologically basic than the vital (union with Christ) in general theological terms. On the contrary, union with Christ is most helpfully understood as the broadest soteriological rubric, within which the various dimensions to salvation (justification, sanctification, etc.) are subsumed. The point we are making is that believers existentially can follow Christ in his weakness and strength only to the degree that this is self-consciously founded upon and generated by Christ's vicarious saving work.

⁷⁴ See Schlatter, *New Testament Period*, 43.

Jesus experienced hell despite living the only life deserving heaven, being the only person who could ever truly say, as the rich young ruler claimed, "All these have I kept."

3. *Regarding the disciples' self-concerned highlighting of their sacrifice (Matt. 19:23–30):* weak Christians can have the ultimate reward without qualifying with a minimum level of sacrifice, because on the cross Jesus made the superlative sacrifice despite deserving the ultimate reward.
4. *Regarding the parable of the workers (Matt. 20:1–16):* weak Christians can have a full day's wage without qualifying with comparatively more work than others, because Jesus worked with strength the whole day—"bearing the burden of the day"—and then went to the cross, waiving the wage he rightfully deserved.

In these four points we do not mean to emphasize Christ's death to the neglect of his resurrection.⁷⁵ Rather we are bringing out the way in which Jesus experienced what all our moral weakness deserved so that we can experience the strength of a righteous status before God simply by acknowledging that weakness, fleeing to Christ, and refusing to self-resource qualification before him. Because of Christ's vicarious weakness, divine power is channeled in admitting, not circumventing, our weakness.⁷⁶ Every human example of strength through weakness is ultimately rooted in Christ's strength through weakness. Even Old Testament saints, by casting themselves in faith on God on account of their weakness and consequently experiencing fruitfulness and strength, truly if unknowingly were appropriating the accomplishment wrought in Christ's life, death, and resurrection (cf. WCF 7.5).⁷⁷ In the intercanonical motif of strength through weakness, Christ provides the consummate fulfillment—establishing the ground for, and superlatively recapitulating in himself, every example of faith-fueled strength in weakness.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ According to Calvin, to speak of either Christ's death or resurrection is necessarily to imply its counterpart (*Institutes*, 2.16.13).

⁷⁶ See Calvin's moving and sustained discussion of this theme in his *Institutes*, 3.8.1–11. Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:169–70.

⁷⁷ Cf. Poythress's discussion of "mini-redemptions," ultimately derived from Christ's redemption (*In the Beginning Was the Word*, 209–18).

⁷⁸ See Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 81–85, 248–57. By "recapitulation" we have in mind "repetition, summing up, representation, and embodiment" in Christ of God's ways with his people in the past (Joel Kennedy, *The Recapitulation of Israel: Use of Israel's History in Matthew 1:1–4:11, WUNT 2/257* [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2008], 23; cf. 21). Royce G. Gruenler helpfully speaks of the way Jesus "'breathed in' all the Old

CONCLUSION

"Deep in the structure of God's redemptive plan," writes Edmund Clowney, "is the principle that His power is made perfect in weakness."⁷⁹ This paradoxical principle is exhibited in the Bible individually, corporately, and christologically. The foregoing pan-biblical overview has sought to demonstrate in broad strokes the pervasive nature of this upside-down pattern. Time and again the biblical storyline is one not of God being frustrated by human weakness but attracted to it. This encompasses not only natural weakness (birthplace, tribal association, speech deficiency, natural timidity) but also moral weakness (deceit, adultery, murder, prostitution, fear). The point is not that God *lowers* what we perceive to be the standard by which his favor is attained but that, because of Christ, he *inverts* that standard. We must conjoin Luther's theology of the cross⁸⁰ with Moltmann's theology of hope,⁸¹ for it is out of the former that the latter emerges—what Marva Dawn has called "a theology of weakness."⁸²

Stated in biblical-theological terms, we could say that humans were created "strong"—morally strong, uninhibited in communion with God. The plunge into sin in Genesis 3 introduced both natural weakness (aging, disease, laborious toil) and, more deeply, moral weakness (a propensity toward idolatry, self-reliance, and hard-heartedness). Yet the odd way out of that weakness is not self-resourced strength but acknowledged weakness, brought to Christ. Such acknowledgment, due to Christ's vicarious and canonically climactic weakness on the cross, clears the way for God's strength. And in the consummated new earth, we will, once again, be strong (cf. 1 Cor. 15:53)—this time, though, without even the possibility of weakness.

Testament typologies . . . has called them home, and personifies them once for all in himself" ("Old Testament Gospel as Prologue to New Testament Gospel," in *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline*, ed. Howard Griffith and John R. Muether, [Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic, 2000], 96).

⁷⁹ Clowney, *Unfolding Mystery*, 84. See also Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Vol. 2 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 139–40.

⁸⁰ See Alistair E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 146–48.

⁸¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 29–46. We are not categorically endorsing Moltmann's "theology of hope."

⁸² Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 35–71.

God's counterintuitive ways are not, however, to be restricted to the biblical account. Scripture sets a permanent trajectory of the paradoxical nature of God's partiality toward weakness that carries down to the twenty-first century church and beyond. God's favor—forgiveness, firm assurance of his fatherly approval, participation in fruitful ministry—is refused those who consider themselves already qualified. It is given instead to those who know themselves to be disqualified. God's power engages not claimed strength but acknowledged weakness—a truth into which Luther had as profound an insight as any.⁸³ If the church is to magnify God in a strength-celebrating world, it must self-consciously present a crucified Christ by crucified Christians and resist the triumphalistic “strength” that feels so deeply to be the path of kingdom advancement. According to the witness of the entire biblical story, culminating in Christ's cross, it is in the very weakness, humiliation, and shame so eschewed by the Corinthian-like Western church that the gospel will go forth. Such weakness is the only—and the promised—path to real strength.⁸⁴

⁸³ Along with other passages cited in this paper, see, e.g., LW 49:105; 51:24, 35, 207, 244; cf. Kolb and Arand, *Genius of Luther's Theology*, 146–47.

⁸⁴ See David Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 258–62; Raymond C. Ortlund, “Power in Preaching: Decide (1 Corinthians 2:1–5),” *Them* 34 (2009): 79–88.

SHORT CONTRIBUTION

A LIBRARIAN'S COMMENTS ON COMMENTARIES: 30 Zephaniah and Haggai

James C. Pakala*

Late in the process of writing this article I decided to begin with a paragraph to illustrate the significance of using multiple commentaries and also not relying on one Bible encyclopedia or dictionary. A few examples from Zephaniah and Haggai will suffice. One tool will say, “It was the invasion of Palestine by the Scythians that awakened Zephaniah to Yahweh's call to be a prophet.”¹ Others dismiss the Scythians or do not even mention them.² Still another gives high credence to the Scythian overflow of Palestine but well argues against reflection of this within Zephaniah.³ A Haggai example is that some suggest the prophet was elderly, therefore had a brief ministry, and as a child saw Solomon's Temple.⁴ Others say that “Haggai was still a child when he returned to Jerusalem with his parents in 537.”⁵

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¹ E. A. Leslie, “Zephaniah, Book of,” in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:951.

² Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah*, The Anchor Bible 25A (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 43, says, “Herodotus confuses us with his description of the Scythians,” and cites both “Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and the Scythians in Palestine” by Henri Cazelles within *A Prophet to the Nations*, ed. Perdue & Kovacs (1984), and R. P. Vaggione's “Over All Asia?” in *JBL* 92 (1973): 523–30. There is no mention at all of Scythians in the Zephaniah articles of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* and *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

³ Bruce Waltke, “Zephaniah, Book of,” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* (2009; a revision of the 1975 *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*), 5:1223. Waltke says the account of Herodotus is “unsuspicious and well-accredited.”

⁴ Herbert M. Wolf, “Haggai,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:594.

⁵ R. K. Harrison, “Haggai, Book of,” in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:16.

God is the God of Promise

Exodus 3 - 6

- I. God wants us to know Him as the God who makes promises. He makes promises because of the goodness and love that are the very nature of his character. Those promises are connected to the fulfillment of his salvation and kingdom purposes in the world.
 - A. Since the creation of the world God has been a God of good promise. All of creation has always been dependent on God for life itself to be sustained

- 1) His commitment to create a *dependent* world binds him to his promise to sustain and care for it. The world is dependent on God and cannot exist or sustain itself on its own.

That is the way God has created things to be. And because He is good, he will follow through to care for the earth

“...he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” **Gen 1:2; Col 1:15-17**
“...for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.” **Rev 4:11**

“The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.” **Psalms 24:1**

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.” **Isaiah 40:25,26**

- 2) After the fall into sin, God made another promise -His commitment to save, redeem and restore mankind and creation to his original purposes. (Gen 3:15) God has bound himself to his promise to accomplish both our salvation and the establishment of his kingdom reign over the earth; as well as fulfilling all the (almost) countless attending promises he makes to us as his children. He has made these promises because he is good and loves to do so. We are as dependent on Him keeping his promise for our salvation as we are for the sustaining of life itself.

- B. **Exodus 3:6-10** “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...”

God is restating the loving nature of his promises to Moses and to the people of Israel in their bondage in Egypt. “I am the God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; promises to make you a blessing to the nations of the earth, and I am here to

fulfill them. I love you. I have seen your misery. I am fully aware of your need and I am here to show you my compassion and faithfulness.”

Gen 3:15, Gen 9:8-11 and Gen 12:2-3, 15:14-17 are the backdrop of God’s promises (his covenants) that he is making to Moses and the Hebrew people.

He will remind the people of Israel of these things again later in their history (Isaiah 49:13-16, 22-26 cf 51:1-3) and he reminds us that these foundational promises are the basis of God’s work among us as well - **Matthew 1:1** cf. Genesis 12:1ff & II Samuel 7:11-13; **Matthew 1:21-23; Luke 1:31-33** cf. Ephesians 1:18-23; Revelation 5:6-13

II. God wants us to trust Him as the God who can and will fulfill his promises

- A. God will keep his promises because of the goodness of his character. (It is not possible for God not to keep his promises.) He makes the promises because he is good, and he will keep them because he is good.

- 1) God has chosen to put his very character at stake in the promises he has made.

In Genesis 15 God tells Abraham his promise to make him into a nation of people that cannot be counted, and that he will take possession of the land he is now in - and Abraham believed God (15:6). Then immediately, Abraham says, “How can I know for sure?” What does God appeal to? *His own character confirmed by a vow* - **Genesis 15:9-21. Cf. Hebrews 6:13-20.**

At all times, and especially in the middle of trials, like the Christians in the book of Hebrews or like the Israelites in Moses’ day, we need to know how to be confident in our faith. What God appeals to for our confidence and says is really on the line, *is the very character of God Himself*. He has promised salvation and justice and godly discipline and training that will yield the fruit of righteousness. Can God be trusted? Will he do what he said he would do? His answer is a resounding yes! He always has. Psalm 89.

The assurance for our hearts to be strengthened is ultimately based on the fact that Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, whom he gave on our behalf, is standing in His presence as an advocate for us, offering his own blood as the payment for our sin and securing for us the full rights of Sons and Daughters of God, who can be certain the promises of God will be given to us.. Romans 8:31ff cf. **James 1:13-18.**

When we don't trust God, we are really calling his character into question. He gives us grace and forgiveness for this, but we need to know what lies at the heart of our unbelief.

- 2) God's promises are related to his character, not ours. He will keep his promises because *He is good*, not because we are good.

We can see this in the context of **Genesis 3:15; Genesis 8:21; Exodus 20 ff (which is preceded by Exodus 5:21; 14:11,12; 15:24; 16:2,3,19,20; and 17:1-3; I Kings 11:34, II Kings 13:23; Hosea 11:1-11**

God's determination to love freely, not our "goodness" in deserving his promises, is the source of his follow through for our salvation and the fulfillment of his promises cf Isaiah **57:14-19**

- B. God will keep his promises because he has the power and wisdom to make sure they will be fulfilled

- 1) Exodus 3:13-22 When God declares himself to be the God of Promise, Moses asks the initial question which underlies every other question he (Moses) asks throughout these next chapters, and every question that will emerge from himself and the Israelites throughout his 40 year experience with them:

"What is your Name?" Meaning: who are you that you make such promises? Who are you that you can do such a thing as this? (Remember: Moses knew something of both the power of Egypt and the bitterness of the Hebrews, Exodus 2:11 ff.)

And here is God's answer: "I AM WHO I AM." Meaning: "I will be who I will be. I can do anything and everything I say, and there is no one or no thing that can stop me. I have all the power, all the wisdom, all the presence, and all the character to do whatever I say I will do."

To demonstrate the sweeping nature of his power to fulfill his will, God tells Moses exactly what will happen in the following verses, including this "humanly impossible scenario," that not only will Israel come out of Egypt, but they will come out so honored by their enemies that the Egyptians will freely hand over their riches to the people of Israel, and it will be a plundering like no one has ever heard of before.

And God *proves* the faithfulness and the power to keep his promises throughout the history of the people of God in both the Old and New Testaments -

regardless of how messy his people get in their sin; regardless of how complicated the opposition is from evil men; regardless of how sinister Satan's plots are to destroy the work of God. Nothing can thwart him.

God supernaturally delivers Israel - **Exodus**. He supernaturally sustains his people in the wilderness. He supernaturally gives them victory over their enemies in Canaan. He supernaturally blesses their deliverers over and over again. He supernaturally blesses David. He even supernaturally blesses them in their darkest hour of discipline when they have been driven from their homeland- cf. Daniel, Shadrach, etc. So much so that Nebuchadnezzar must confess God is the only God, and Cyrus King of Persia is moved to restore and rebuild the Temple.....and Satan's most evil moment of betrayal becomes the very means of salvation for the whole world through Christ's death on the cross. All because it is God's character and promise at stake and he has the power behind his promise to fulfill it. **Acts 4:23-31**

- 2) God makes these startling, humanly-impossible-to-attain, but divinely-guaranteed promises throughout Scripture-

The birth of Isaac and the blessing to all nations on earth; Joseph as a ruler of the nations; the conquering of the nations in the Promised Land of Canaan; David's "Son" who will inherit all the nations of the earth; the promise of the age of the Spirit when all people will receive the salvation of God; the promise that *every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord of all things*; the promise of a new heaven and a new earth; the promise of the reconciliation of all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ

.....and he makes incredible, humanly-impossible promises for you and me today... that we are new creations, and everything old that defined us is gone and replaced; that our sins will never define us and be our master, but now righteousness defines us, by grace - Romans 6; that we have a seal, guaranteeing our salvation- the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment of God's promise of what is yet to come **Ephesians 1**; that God will work absolutely everything together for our good and will do nothing less than shape us in the image of Christ himself and make us partakers in the very nature and character of God **Romans 8:28, I Peter 1**; "Jesus Christ is the same - yesterday, today and forever" **Hebrews 13:5-8** is a statement about his promise to be with us forever and the freedom to never be afraid of men - the very same thing Moses was wrestling with; and the promise that God is building us into the Church, the body of Christ and that he wants to bring justice and righteousness on earth through us. **Ephesians 1:15-23**

- C. God will keep his promises regardless of the state of faith of mankind

1) If we have little faith - Moses **Exodus 4:1-14**

The obstacles can appear to be so great in our minds that we can't see past them. It is beyond our ability to reason through how God's promises can actually take place, because our experience screams at us that the promises of God cannot possibly overcome the impossible crises in which we find ourselves. And yet, God did what he said he would do for Moses- and he does it for us as well..

2) If others have a sour faith - Israel **Exodus 5:15-23, 6:1-12**

The discouragement of the people of Israel became a source of discouragement for Moses, but it did not change God's promise one single bit, nor what God was about to do.

That same discouragement exists throughout the pages of Scripture- yet God continues to fulfill his promise. In Corinth **1 Cor 1**; in Sardis **Revelation 1**; in Israel - Deborah and Barak **Judges 4&5**; Gideon **Judges 6:14ff**; David's brothers **1 Samuel 17:26ff**; the people who returned to rebuild Jerusalem **Zechariah 8**.

3) If many have no faith - Pharaoh Exodus 5:1-14

The Philistines didn't have faith in God; nor did the Assyrians, nor the Babylonians, nor the Persians, nor the Romans. It simply doesn't matter to God. The Philistines became subject to Israel through a rock and a sling - **1 Samuel 17:45-47**. The Assyrians were taken out by an Angel who brought death - **2 Chronicles 32:10-21**; Babylon made a decree that all the nations they had conquered should worship God **Daniel 4:1-3, 34,35**; Persia ordered the rebuilding of the Temple **Ezra 1:1-4**; and Rome, under Constantine, declared the worship of Jesus Christ and the protection of the ministers of the Gospel as the State supported religion of the whole of western Europe. *All these were sworn enemies of God; sworn enemies of the Gospel. But none of them could stop God from fulfilling his promises.* And God is still at work in the world today bringing the nations under the authority of Jesus Christ.

We need to know our faith does not activate God's promise, as if he will do nothing in the world unless we "let him" or "help him" through our faith. What our faith does is allow us the freedom and privilege of entering into and enjoying the unfolding of God's promises in the world. Many in Jesus' day did not believe. He "could not do miracles in those places (Matt 13:58)." Why? Because he chose to make the condition of our personal involvement in those miracles our own faith Hebrews **11:6**. However, even if we don't believe, God will not be stopped in fulfilling his promises of salvation and justice. **Isaiah 42:1-4; 43:25-44:5**

The Nature of God's Promises

Exodus 3:7-10 Moses and the people of God had very explicit promises. They were in Egypt as slaves who were oppressed, and God had come making a promise to set them free. Has God made us promises? explicit promises? promises that we can say- "I know God will fulfill this, because he clearly said he would. And I am so sure of it that I can go back to God and claim the promise, unquestioningly, unqualified, for me - for us, together as the people of God?"

I. Knowing the Core Promise of God and the Supporting Promises of the Covenant

One of the great testing/maturing points of the Christian life is to be sure we understand the good promises God has made to us. As we rightly know and believe these promises, our faith will be increasingly strengthened because we will be much more aware of actively seeing the unfolding of God's promises in our lives and throughout the world.

Genesis 3. The heart of Satan's deception in the Garden of Eden was to call the promise of God into question: "I have provided for you. You may eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" – Lucifer's interpretation: "That is not a good, or fair or true promise. You won't die. God is actually trying to keep you from reaching your potential - to be like God yourself."

Luke 4. This was also at the heart of Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness – "if you really are loved by God - make bread; throw yourself down from the Temple; and certainly, find some easier way to be Lord of the nations. Satan even uses the language of Scripture promise: "it is written - you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Satan's approach hasn't changed any. If we don't understand the good things God has actually promised we can be very susceptible to Satan and to our own fleshly desires to distort the promises; from there we try to hold God accountable for what we have decided the promises mean, and in the end, we can despise or disbelieve God for failing to meet those promises (which at this point =our expectations).

A. What is The Promise of God?

After Adam's fall into sin (and all mankind and creation with him), God promised to redeem a people for himself from the destruction of sin - through his Son Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit - and to renew us in His image as a people of goodness, redemption and trust (justice-holiness, mercy-compassion, and humility-faith).

Ever since Adam's sin and the death that came as a result... our broken fellowship with God; our broken fellowship with one another; our brokenness inside ourselves; the break between mankind and creation... God has been fulfilling this promise to bring life and restoration in all these areas by his Son, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy

*Spirit and has actively been bringing that salvation throughout history to all the nations of the earth. God will keep fulfilling his promise until there is a complete renewal of all things under the headship of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Genesis 3:15 (the seed promise), Colossians 1:9-20, Ephesians 1:9,10 (the fully revealed extent of the promise)***

This is the very heart of God's Promise throughout Scripture. This is a promise that has all kinds of connected implications- which are fleshed out with all the additional supporting promises God has given us in his Word.

B. What are the Major Supporting Promises? The Unfolding of the Covenant

- 1) The promise that God's salvation would come through Adam's Offspring and would defeat the work of Satan and restore us to the joy of fellowship and life with God - **Genesis 3:15; Luke 3:23/37; John 3:16; John 17:1-3**
- 2) The promise that God would sustain the created world for his purposes, no matter how evil men behave- **Genesis 8:21,22, 9:8ff**
- 3) The promise that God's salvation would bless the nations of the earth, through Adam's Offspring, and specifically through Abraham the man of faith (who had a child born of "promise") and His Offspring **Genesis 12:1-3; Galatians 4:22 ff**

Jesus Christ, born of Abraham, our Savior and Lord - **Galatians 3:16**

And the gift of the Holy Spirit, our Power (enabler, comfort, guide)-**Galatians 3:13,14**, through whom we enjoy fellowship with the Father - **Galatians 4:4-7**, all of which we receive by faith - **Galatians 3:5**

All the nations who believe are children of Abraham and are one in Christ
- **Galatians 3:26-29**

- 4) The promise that God would teach us Justice and Mercy through the Law, only to be lived out by receiving righteousness as a gift through faith in Christ **Exodus 20 (Ex & Lev) Deuteronomy 30:11-14, cf Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 28:18-20, Romans 3:27-31, 6:15-18**
- 5) The promise that Adam's Offspring, who would be Abraham's Seed, would also be the Son of David, and as such would be exalted as **The King** of all nations and would rule throughout history to establish justice, mercy and humility in the hearts of men (the establishment of God's kingdom rule and reign) **II Samuel 7:16; Isaiah 9:6,7; Luke 1:31-33; Acts 4:25ff; Rev. 1:4-7**
- 6) The promise that God himself would do this work by the power of the Holy Spirit in the very depths of our hearts, and change our very nature from being people

who disbelieve and disobey God, to those who love him and seek to obey him
Jeremiah 31:33,34; Ezekiel 36:24-27; Acts 2:32-39

- 7) The promise that he will complete this renewal and restoration and take creation and our lives even beyond the Garden of Eden, to a place where sin can never enter again, the earth and the entire universe will be restored, and we will live forever in the Presence and fellowship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Isaiah 65:17ff, cf Romans 8:19-21; Revelation 21:1-4

All these promises add up to this: the devastating results of the fall have been, are being and will ultimately, completely be reversed. Satan and sin has been defeated and the ultimate destructiveness of death- separation from God, from each other, from ourselves and from creation- has been reversed because of the love of the Father, the sacrifice and resurrection rule and reign of the Son, and the enduring Presence of the Holy Spirit; and all things are in the process of moving toward complete renewal.

Our worst fears will not materialize. God has promised:

-We will not be separated from God, ever again - His love will always be with us **Romans 8:28 ff.**

-We will not be separated from one another - God will unite us in heart
I John 1:1 ff

- We will not be “undone” by the battle of sin within - the Spirit will lead us into the full rights of sons **Galatians 4:4-7; 5:16-18**

- We will not be undone by creation - our Father is sustaining all things
Matthew 6:25ff

- We will not somehow “miss” the will of God - the Spirit will lead us into true righteousness and holiness **I Corinthians 1:1-9**

- We will not somehow end up under an oppressive “authority” whose power and purposes will define and dictate our lives - Jesus is the King - **Ephesians 1:19-23**

- We will never be defined, defeated and discarded by sin’s power **Romans 7:14-21**

- We will never do all this work in vain - one day we will inherit the earth -
Matthew 5:5; I Corinthians 15:50-58

These are the core of God's promises to us. They are absolute, certain, unconditional promises that we can build our lives on. We need never hesitate to ask God to fulfill these promises in our lives.

II. Understanding what the Promises of God Are Not: Lessons from Exodus 3 - 6

There is an understanding and a process here that we must recognize and commit ourselves to that is extremely crucial:

The promises of God are absolute, certain, and cannot be thwarted. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Our understanding of the promises however, is often tainted and obscured by our sin, Satan's lies and the deceptions of our various cultures. Therefore we are going to have to regularly do two things: constantly be willing to re-submit our minds and our understanding to God's Word when things don't look right to us; and, constantly ask God to deepen our understanding of what the promises are/are not telling us.

In every life, every culture and every point in history, Satan will try to find "new ways" to camouflage the old lies about God's promises. The best way to avoid his lies is to know what the good promises of God do guarantee us, and then to strike out the things they don't guarantee from there. **Just like Adam and Eve, we are all called to a relationship of continuous dependent faith in God to teach us good and evil.**

A. Because God promises, that does not mean we won't struggle with doubts

Moses had lots of questions. We've already said this, but just need to restate it one more time. We may naively think that if it is God who has spoken, our hearts won't have struggles with unbelief. Not true. God is not put off by our honest questions.

Listen to Jeremiah's prayer recorded in Jeremiah 12:1-4, and God's response 12:5ff

B. Because God promises, that does not mean others won't oppose the work of God in their unbelief, with real, costly opposition

Pharaoh had the means to oppose the work of God. God even gave him that authority. It's just that Pharaoh's authority was limited, and was not greater than God's.

C. God's promise to accomplish salvation does not mean we will always like how he fulfills his promise

Moses and the Hebrew people both had a hard time with how things were going. It appeared that the “practical” authority belonged to Pharaoh and not to God, though it wasn’t true. Even Jesus said, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass....”

- D. God’s promises do not mean we are not going to experience serious physical difficulties

The Hebrews were overworked and beaten right at the time of God’s great promise of deliverance. Jesus was physically hungry. Paul did endure all the dangers and physical difficulties in fulfilling his ministry. James, the brother of Jesus, was put to death, as were Peter and Paul. John did spend time isolated on the island of Patmos. The Hebrew Christians did have their property confiscated and the author of Hebrews encourages them with these words – “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” **Hebrews 12:4**

- E. God’s promises do not mean others will be able to see beyond their discouragement and be able to hear the promises in a way that brings hope. **Ezekiel 2:1-9**

So, does God actually promise much? If you want freedom from the dominating power of sin in this life- freedom to love and know God, freedom to love one another and the amazing hope of seeing the kingdom of God fill the earth and the hope of living together in the life to come with God and his people forever and inheriting the earth and all things in Christ - yes.

If you want an across the board, blanket freedom from pain in this life - either any personal pain or the pain associated with the suffering and cost of loving sinners in a sinful world - no. Satan can lie to you all day long and tell you how “unloving” God’s promises are, how he really doesn’t have your best in mind; and in the end he can leave you disappointed with God, unwilling to learn from the things you suffer; unwillingly to freely enter into the sufferings of Christ for the sake of God’s love in other people’s lives; and basically controlled by a root of bitterness. **Hebrews 12:1-3**

But in the meantime, God will still be fulfilling his good promises throughout the earth, and his love will be there for you to enter into and enjoy any time you are ready to start believing him.

Living by Faith in the Promises of God

I. Learning to Believe the Promises of God

A. An act of humility

As we progress through life, God's intention is for us to grow more and more in our faith and the resulting obedience in him. This applies to every area of life - business, family, neighbors, world issues, inward, personal thoughts and actions. But at many, many turns (sometimes daily, sometimes every fifteen minutes) we will be confronted with a sometimes subtle, sometimes overwhelming sense of unbelief - a lack of trust in God. That can be brought on by one of several factors: the opposition of the unbelieving world that constantly tries to factor God out of any equation about life and offers a self-serving alternative; Satan's barrage of lies that call God's faithfulness into question, particularly in the midst of trials; or, our own sinful desires that arise from our fleshly sin nature that remains within us and is opposed to the work of the Spirit of God within. **John 2:7-17, 4:1-3, 7-12; 5:21; Galatians 5:16-18**

1) The promises are where we are going to go to get our minds cleared and our faith renewed, and this requires humility

- a) The first question is this - whose report will you believe? And where will you go to get the report? As you experience life, what's really going on? How do you make sense of it? How do you know where things are really going

The questions are legitimate. God never rebukes his children for having questions. He sometimes rebukes us for the way we ask them- in humility, or in arrogant unbelief - but the problem is not if the questions arise. The real issue is where you go with them. Do you resort to your own understanding? your own assessment of life? your experience and what "you have learned" from life?

Or, do you start by coming back to God to re-learn, to deepen your understanding of what it is God has actually promised us as his people. This is essentially what Job did; and David; and Abraham; and Moses; and even Christ himself as he answered Satan- "It is written, man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." That is God's promise - "You need bread, but it is only a part of the answer for what will sustain you. What really sustains you, and all things, is my promise, my word. You need to know how to interpret life, not from the ultimate point of bread, but from the ultimate point of my faithful, sustaining promise."

This is an act of humility because it means surrendering our “right” to interpret life on our own. It means we acknowledge that we can’t trust our own mental processes to come to the knowledge of the truth. It is a return to learning good and evil from God, as we were created to learn it at the beginning.

Many people miss a lot of the benefit of their faith simply because they insist on listening to themselves. Their hearts cry out “injustice, bitterness” and they choose to believe that rather than humbling themselves in the sight of God. **Isaiah 66:2**

This process of humbling ourselves and listening to God can be something very brief, or at times, very lengthy. Many Psalms give us the highlight of this kind of battle, but on closer look reveal a longer-term struggle (**Psalm 41; 42**). No matter how long the battle, the issue remains the same: to humble ourselves before God and learn his love and promises.

- b) What we need to return to, to listen to, to wrestle with before God is his Promise given to us in Christ.

II Peter 1:3, 4 tells us God has given us great and precious promises, through which (by believing them) we participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

God tells us to listen to His Word, but he does not simply tell us in harsh reality tones “This is life. This is reality. This is truth. Take it or leave it, it is still true.” *God always speaks to us as the God of loving promise.* He tells us the problems are the problems of sin, and the problems of living in a fallen world, and that we ourselves are self-centered in our understanding. *But he always promises his love and grace and wisdom and power for us as his children,* and that he will use everything in life to fulfill the most deeply meaningful purpose of all: to draw us more into his love and more into love for others, and the establishment of his kingdom on earth. *We are children of promise Galatians 4:28 and everything about our life in relationship to God is based on promise Galatians 3:5,* and it all comes to us because of the finished work of Christ **Romans 8:31ff.**

Every command God gives us, every insight he offers us about life, every bit of knowledge about creation is always packaged as a promise to us as his children. Every command he gives, he will enable us to follow by grace; every bit of insight is given with the promise of enjoying God more and loving others with greater insight. God doesn’t just command us to be humble and

then he will dwell with us. He also promises to lead us in the process - cf **Psalm 107; Luke 22:31,32.**

B. Believing the promises is an act of trust

Learning to walk as those who believe the promises of God begins as an act of humility - submitting our hearts and minds to listen to what God has said he is doing and will do - and then it must move into an act of trust. Moses had a choice. He heard God's answer- his promise of love and faithfulness. Then, he needed to make a choice to trust God to fulfill his word.

Double-mindedness- trying to believe God's interpretation/promise and your own assessment (where it differs from God's) at the same time, is at the core an issue of pride. What does God say? **James 1:5-8; cf 4:1-10**

II. The Effect of Believing the Promises - Participating in the Divine Nature **2 Peter 1:3,4**

A. Increased enjoyment of our fellowship with God that leads us to trust him more

Moses believed God's promises, saw God fulfill his promises, and enjoyed fellowship with God that led him into a life of praise and worship and love and obedience. In general, many of the Israelites did not make that step into faith and trust of God's goodness to fulfill his word... **Consequently, every new crisis was a new cause to doubt God's love, instead of an opportunity to see his faithful promises unfold.** As soon as Moses was gone for 30 days, the Israelites "worship" turned to idolatry. They wanted a "god" they could count on to lead them in a way they thought fit. **Exodus 32:1**

B. Becoming a People of Hope – a confidence that God will work his goodness on the earth

- 1) *Believing the promises of God gives us Hope for the present situation.* If God is good, and has committed himself to love us, and has promised to use his almighty power and wisdom to direct our lives to fulfill his good purposes, then *either he is going to be working those promises right now, in our present circumstances (even if they are difficult) or his promise is not true.*

If we believe and know God is at work today, we will start looking at our situations through his wisdom instead of our own and begin learning to see and anticipate his promises already being fulfilled now. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" **Lamentations 3:22, 23.**

If we are not looking for that, we can miss a lot of what God is doing. "For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love." **Psalm 33:4,5**

- 2) *Hope for the future.* As we see God more clearly working in the present, it will increasingly make us a people of hope for the future. If there is nothing to fear today, because God has given us Christ, and with him - all things (**Romans 8:32**), and we are increasingly seeing the unfolding of God's promise now, then what does the future hold? If we are learning to love more now, learning to enjoy God's love more - not despite, but even through the trials and difficulties of life- then what hope do we have, whatever comes tomorrow? Just greater love **Romans 5:1-5**. And that hope is sure, because God has promised and already told us where things are headed- to the restoration of all things and to a life forever with God.

People who lose hope either do not have or do not practically know the promise of God's love and faithfulness for today.

C. Endurance through Trials

As we believe God's promises, and see them unfold, we become a people of endurance. Paul says we can endure when we know the outcome is good. And how do we know? By faith in God who keeps his promises. **Romans 8:18-25**

D. Change in our Character

By the believing the promises of God, we benefit through the trials we endure. We cannot just grit our teeth and grow in our endurance in the Christian life and gain the benefit of what God wants to teach us. We must believe God. He requires it of us. Not because he is trying to make it hard on us, but because he created us for love and fellowship with him. Enduring trials without the love and fellowship that come through trust and faith doesn't yield the fruit of righteousness. It may yield the fruit of hard-nosed, no nonsense, joyless Christianity, but that is not really God's intention. He wants a people who can laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep **Romans 12:9-16**. He wants us to be free from the inner motivations of fear and hate and selfish desire that drive other men. We can learn those things as experience God's faithfulness to keep his promises through times of trial.

E. Increased Confidence to Risk for the Kingdom

The net result of these things, gained through believing the promises of God, is a greater freedom to risk everything for the kingdom. It produces the liberty to die daily; to hold all created things loosely; to not grab after power; to freely enter into the sufferings of Christ. **2 Corinthians 3:12-4:15**

CORE VALUES -- "The Gospel of the Kingdom"

INTRODUCTION

A Basic Definition: What is meant by the "Gospel of the kingdom"? And, why we need to ask this question.

What did Matthew mean when he tells us, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, **preaching the gospel (good news) of the kingdom?**" [Matt 4:23, 9:35] And why did Jesus tell his disciples to "preach this message; the kingdom of heaven is near?" [Matt 10:2] What did that announcement of "the kingdom" mean to a Jewish family in a Galilean village? What does it mean that after his resurrection Jesus spent 40 days "speaking about the kingdom of God?" [Acts 1:3] What was it Philip said that made Luke describe the advance of the gospel in Samaria in these terms, "But when they believed Philip as he preached **the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**, they were baptized....?" [Acts 8:12] Why would Luke describe part of Paul's ministry while a prisoner in Rome in these terms, "For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the **kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ?**" [Acts 28:30-31] Or Paul describe belonging to Christ and being a member of the church in these words, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into **the kingdom of the Son he loves**, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins?" [Colossians 1:13, 14] Or John address the seven churches in Asia minor this way, "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us **to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father** - to him be the glory and power for ever and ever! Amen?" [Revelation 1:5, 6]

And while the term "kingdom" is not explicitly used in other passages, it is implicit in the language nonetheless, as in Peter's description of the church, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." [1 Peter 2:9-10]

Why did Jesus spend so much time teaching "kingdom" parables? [Matt 13:1-25; 13:24-30; 13:31-43; 13:44; 13:45-46; 13:47-50; 18:21-35; 20:1-16; 21:33-46; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; 25:14-30] Why is the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount constantly set in a "kingdom" framework? [Matt 5:3, 10, 17-20, 6:9-13, 6:33, 7:21] Why does someone have to be "born again" to "enter the kingdom" versus Jesus simply saying "born again" to become a "Christian" or "member of the church?" [John 3:1-5] Is there any distinction here between the terms "church, kingdom, Christian, and believer-in-Christ," or do they melt into one basic general meaning of "a personal relationship with Jesus?"

The Expectation of the Jewish People and Explanation to the Gentile World

Part of what we need to underscore here is that God's people – the Jewish Covenant community, the people in the towns and villages in the time of Caesar's Roman rule -- were in fact looking for the coming of their King, who would re-establish the long awaited, complete, full kingdom rule of God promised in Daniel 7:13-14,

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And 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 one that shall not be destroyed,"

and described repeatedly in the Prophets as the great fulfillment of God's purposes for Israel and for all the nations of the world. [*Isaiah 2:1-5, 9:1-6, 11:1-9, Zechariah 9:9-17, Micah 2:5,6, Psalm 110*]

They were looking for God to exercise his kingly authority and bring an end to the rule of the pagan, gentile nations that oppressed both the Jewish people and all the rest of mankind as well and would enable them to serve God as a righteous, just and faithful people (Luke 1:51-55, 1:67-75). AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT JESUS WAS PROMISING THEM HE HAD COME TO FULFILL. Jesus did not come to set aside their kingdom expectations; nor did he come announcing an invitation to "join a church" (in our traditional sense of the word) or issue an invitation to enter a "personal (individualistic) relationship with Him." Every time he taught them about the "kingdom of God" (the Person who rules this kingdom) or the "kingdom of heaven" (the place of authority from which he rules- above the expanse of the earth, Psalm 18:6-16; 97:1-6; 104:1-3, Dan 7:13-14, Acts 1:9-11), he was explaining to them precisely HOW he had come to fulfill that promise.

A major part of the wrestle for the Jewish people was that Jesus was taking those very promises, and those very categories, and re-telling them and defining them in a way that constantly challenged them and made them wrestle: he was the King who was to come but he had no army, no money, no formal education, no "Jerusalem/Temple" pedigree. In fact he came in such humility and such a lowly position that Isaiah describes him as, "having no form or majesty that would attract people." [*Isa 53:1-3*] What he did have was the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the affirmation of God the Father as his Son, who would in fact by his mission [*Luke 4:18ff*] and lifestyle bring the kingdom of true righteousness and compassion, forgiveness and restoration that the Prophets declared. It was such a powerful demonstration, that the people tried to make him king by force. [*John 6:15, Luke 19:36-40*]

In the end, the Jewish religious-political leadership so feared his growing acclaim among the people, [*Matt 21:1-11, John 12:12-19*] that they brought him to trial, asked him directly if he was claiming to be the one described in Daniel 7 [*Mt 26:57ff*] and then presented him to Pilate

to be put to death precisely with the charge that he was claiming to be king. [Lk 23:1ff] And in fact, he was the very King he claimed to be and Peter tells us that his resurrection vindicated him as the Eternal King who is now seated as the Messiah and Lord of all mankind. [Acts 2:22-36]

Who (or what) is “the church” and how does the church relate to the kingdom?

The answer is not at all difficult; it is simply clouded in our thinking by generations and multiple layers of cultural thinking and expectations that have attached themselves to our idea of “church.” We tend to associate the word church with “church buildings” and “church activities” like Sunday morning worship and prayer meetings and fellowship dinners. Not all of that is wrong, much of it has a lot of truth to it (though only partial truth). However, this is not what the early believers would have understood by the use of the term. As all first year Greek students can tell you, the word we translate as “church” is the Greek word “ekklesia” and means a “gathering, meeting, or group that has been called out.”

The actual English word for “church” is rooted in an English-Scottish term “kirk” that refers to a building and may have its origin in a totally different Greek word “kuriakos” which refers more to a “place belonging to a lord,” and is a very poor choice for translation. The term “ekklesia” does not refer to a building or location, but to a people “who are called out, or called together.”

So what is the “church” or the “called-out ones” referring to? It is a reference to those who have been summonsed or called by Jesus the Messiah to put their faith in him and take up the cause of his kingdom. They are called out – from the ways of the world and from among the ethnic groups of the world -- to become disciples of Jesus who now seek first his kingdom.

The implications and the organic connectedness between the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of the Apostle’s in their letters is far easier to see if the translators had simply taken the actual Greek term used by Jesus in the context of Matthew 16 and 18 and translated it “my called out people.” It would have made the connection to the understanding of the early Gentile and Jewish believers, that they were now, together, the “called out, gathered” followers of Jesus who were to pursue his kingdom, much easier for our contemporary minds to comprehend. So, for instance, some have erred in calling Jesus’ references to the “church” in Matt 16 and 18 as out of place with his kingdom teaching; but that is only if you try to place our notions of church (buildings, structures, organization) into the word. If it is more straightforwardly understood as those who were being called to become his followers, who would pursue his kingdom, the term exactly fits his kingship and kingdom message.

One final question/issue that is helpful to our discussion about the good news of the kingdom that needs to be addressed: Why does Paul talk about going to the Gentiles and preaching “Jesus?” One of his more famous statements is, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” [1 Corinthians 2:2] Again, in the book of Acts Paul’s sermon to the Gentiles at Athens says this, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but

now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." [Acts 17:30]

This has led some to say that Jesus preached the kingdom, and Paul preached Jesus. And indeed, in the practice of many churches, there is a basic split in the thinking about the work of Christ on the Cross and the message of "the good news of the kingdom." Chances are if you are part of an evangelical church, regardless of the stripe, you will hear the gospel talked about almost exclusively from the point of view of personal forgiveness of sins and a personal relationship with Christ. That truth, which is so crucial and so good and so necessary, is in fact part of the message of the gospel of the kingdom, but the problem is we have made it the whole message. Consequently, when Jesus speaks of the "gospel" in kingdom terms, many evangelicals are sometimes confused about what he is referring to.

So why would Paul say, "I preach Christ?" The answer is very simple. The gentiles by and large had no context for knowing the promises from Isaiah and Daniel and Micah. They could not, on first contact, know what Paul would have been referring to had he preached "the good news of the kingdom." But what they would have understood is the announcement of a King. The terms "Christos" (Christ) and "Kurios" (Lord) were familiar Greek terms and they would have completely understood they were being told about "one who was anointed" to be "king." To the Jew, Paul and Jesus could say "the promised kingdom of God is here, and Jesus is the promised King." To the Gentile Paul would say, let me tell the good news of this amazing king, and his death and resurrection; and then explain the nature of the kingdom.

Our conclusion is that the message Jesus of Nazareth preached to the expectant, longing Jewish community of his day was the good news that the long-awaited kingdom reign of God over the earth, for and through his people had arrived; and that he, Jesus, was the promised Messiah and King-son-of-David who would establish that kingdom. That holistic kingdom promise included: forgiveness for all the past failures of God's people, as well as anyone who put their faith in him; the end of the Temple in Jerusalem and the building of the living Temple of God's people anointed by the Spirit; the inclusion of the redemption of all nations; the empowering and establishment of a restored and reconciled people would live out the righteousness, justice and compassion of the Law; the eventual defeat of all the enemies of god's people; the inheritance now expanding beyond Canaan (the promised land) to include the whole, renewed earth and universe. And, we believe, this was the message to the gentiles as well; that along with the Jews, they were now called out to become the gathered people of God who pursued this kingdom rule of God together (the "ekklesia" church).

Some of our misreading of Scripture passages over the years results from confusing the personal invitation to salvation, with the purpose of that salvation- the calling to pursue the kingdom of God, which has a special focus in bringing justice to this world by caring for the poor and oppressed. So for instance, we read the story of the sower sowing seed (Matt 13) and

reduce that to a lesson about how personal evangelism takes place; when this parable is not (narrowly) about personal salvation, but (more broadly) about how the kingdom itself- the purposes of God's justice, compassion and love being brought to the world through his people- had not advanced in the past through the people of Israel, but would now through Christ in his people, bear much fruit.

There are additional aspects to the nature of the expansion of this kingdom that will be incorporated in other core value lessons, but just to list a few: the kingdom is only present when the KING is present, through forgiveness and anointing of his people; the kingdom comes in and through the weak things of this world; the kingdom looks like and grows from a mustard seed; the kingdom advances through much suffering and trial; the kingdom has a focus on the poor and disenfranchised; the kingdom has both an "already" and a "not yet" look to it -- meaning, it brings deep, real, tremendous change now, and yet, still awaits the final day of Christ's second coming for its full, complete expression.

Why We Need to Ask This Question: It focuses everything

The church is "the called out ones"; called to follow Christ as King in the establishment of his kingdom. The "called out ones" exist for this purpose. All God's people called together from among the nations are now called to "seek first the kingdom and his righteousness." (Matt 6:33)

So, what is the focus of the kingdom? And how does that affect everyone's life and life pursuits and the life of the church body together? Is, "I want to know Christ" (Phil 3) the same as "I want to know and see his kingdom come and his will be done"? Our answer is, yes; but can we be more specific about what that means?

For some (many?) the idea of the kingdom it is a rather large, almost unidentifiable issue. The reason is that in some circles the kingdom of God has come to mean "cultural transformation."

This is part of what our theological circles call "a reformed world and life view." A part of that view is that the "kingdom of God" is meant to affect every aspect of culture and transform them from philosophies, ideals, practices and systems that are tainted by other "world views" (whether secularism or other religious world views) and gradually see them transformed to a more "redeemed," "God-centered" and "God-glorifying" thought and practice. And so the people of God are called to influence all aspects of culture by applying their Christianity in the arts, sciences, politics, business and family structures of the culture to make them more faithfully reflect the image of God. There is also a practical view that Christians are meant to do these things predominately as individuals "living out the kingdom" each in their own sphere of influence, and the corporate expression of the church fundamentally exists to strengthen, equip and train them to go as individuals into the world and exercise kingdom influence.

Obviously, there is much, much truth here. And yet, without the simple, direct, core values of the kingdom defining those efforts, and without an equal manifestation of the corporate body of Christ working together to express the kingdom, all of this very good sounding “world view theology” can drift into cultural assimilation and an unhealthy individualism that actually thwarts the fullest expression of the kingdom.

Our contention is when Jesus used the term “the good news of the kingdom,” he was explicitly referring to the establishment of God’s rule and reign as described in Isaiah 2, 9, 11, 58 and 61 (as examples) through the people of God both personally and collectively:

Isaiah 2:2 It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it,³ and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go the law,¹ and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and 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.⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 11:3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear,⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

Isaiah 58:6 "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed¹ go free, and to break every yoke?⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?⁸ Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

Isaiah 61:1 “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;¹ he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of

gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.”

How much any culture is or is not transformed is not our primary calling, though it is our real and concrete hope. Our primary calling is to seek justice and righteousness in all things and that means especially seeking it on behalf of the poor and oppressed. The kingdom is “for the poor.” The resulting cultural transformation is something we hope for, but it is a side effect or benefit of seeking first the kingdom by the church being people of justice, compassion and humility.

I. God’s Zeal for His Kingdom Reign on Earth

A. What are the values of the kingdom of God?

In order to help us understand the kind of reign God wants to exercise over us he has given us his law, which is a reflection of his character: this is the holiness and the righteousness he requires of us in his kingdom reign.

As Jesus comes to establish the kingdom rule and reign of God, here are his words regarding the Law:

Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Lord summarizes our responsibilities to the Law in several ways in Scripture. One such summary is the Ten Commandments. Another is the “two great commandments”- to love the Lord our God with all our heart...and our neighbor as ourselves. One other summary of the values of God’s kingdom is simply “his will.” So Jesus teaches us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Micah 6:8 is another such summary and is actually the lens through which we want to view and approach the rest of this kingdom study: “He has showed you, o man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Whenever the Scriptures call us to learn or pursue “righteousness” that is just another summary word that includes these issues of justice, mercy and humility, loving our neighbor

and loving God. As children of his kingdom, all his discipline, love, care and promises will be bent towards shaping our lives as people who are marked by these traits.

“For those God foreknew he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first born among many brothers.” [Romans 8:29]

Micah 6:8 helps us to see the issues of kingdom righteousness from a different approach than we are sometimes used to. From this passage, the *core activities* that God himself describes as the fulfillment of this kingdom lifestyle *include*:

To act justly:

To make sure you personally treat others with all goodness, rightness and justice in every situation of life -- as a merchant [Lev 19:36], an employer [James 5:4,5], a spouse and parent [Eph 5], a citizen [Romans 13], a homeowner [Deut 22:8].

But becoming a person of justice has another dimension to it that is often overlooked: taking an active role in helping others when you see them being treated with injustice. In other words, to do whatever good we can for those who are oppressed. What is especially critical to note is that this is a covenantal obligation; it is not a matter of simply a discretionary choice. He has shown us what he “requires” of us as his people: to do justice.

[Isaiah 1:17,21-23, 58:10; Psalm 9:7-9, 68:4-6, 146:5-9]

The people who are the most vulnerable to injustice, and the ones to whom we are called by God to pay special attention are the widow, the orphan, the immigrant and the poor. [Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:10; Jeremiah 22:15, 16; James 1:27]

To love mercy:

To be the kind of person who delights in showing compassion for people in need – when we see people in pain, distress or misery, to step in and take action to relieve their need. This applies to all kinds of need -- but God calls us to pay attention to obvious physical need: hunger, shelter, clothing, sickness. [Isa 58:6-12; Mt 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37; 1 John 3:16-18]

What is so unusual about God’s mercy is that it comes from a God of grace: we extend such help even to people who are unworthy or, who deserve just the opposite; we even show mercy to our enemies. [Matthew 5:43 ff, Romans 12:17]

To walk humbly with our God:

We are not to pursue this lifestyle from a position of arrogance, superiority or condescension, but from a humble walk with God: a humility that comes directly from being the recipients of God's great mercy in our lives [2 Cor 8:1-9], and a humility that translates into actually entering the humble circumstances of the poor and vulnerable [Phil 2:5-8]. This means we trust God to do His will His way - even boasting in our weakness [2 Cor 12:9ff], and a humility that means we will not rely on human sources of strength, but on the Spirit's power, [Zechariah 4:6; Acts 2 & 4].

The humility that comes first from seeing our own need for and reception of God's mercy and favor and is willing to become vulnerable, means the deeds of justice and compassion will not be marked by a motivation of making ourselves feel important, but they will be done as a true expression of the love of God, with careful concern for the person's true need, and "quietly" - without drawing a lot of attention to ourselves [Isa 42:1-4]. It also means the poor and vulnerable, together with us, will see that the salvation and deliverance is directly from the hand and power of God.

II. The Unfolding History of God's Kingdom Righteousness in His People

Since these three traits of justice, mercy and humility are at the heart of God's character and because they are core values of God's kingdom, they are reflected in all his dealings with his people throughout the history of Scripture.

- A. The Covenant Community of God established at Sinai -- and the justice/mercy/humility focus of Genesis – Deuteronomy
 - 1. The Genesis 1 & 2 narrative sets the all-important pattern for God's original intent for humanity: Man and Woman created in God's image to do good in exercising dominion over the earth
 - 2. The violence and oppression after the Fall [Gen 3-6] are answered both by God's justice and his mercy [Gen 9]
 - 3. Abraham becomes the father (the Covenant head and representative) of the community of faith that God will call from all the nations of the earth. Over against the violent establishment of greatness by mankind through idolatry, God will freely bless Abraham, a man in humble circumstances, through faith (Gen 12) in order to be a blessing to the nations

- a. Part of Abraham’s training includes learning how difficult injustice and oppression can be—and yet, experiencing the mercy and compassion of God in his need [*Gen 12:10ff*]
 - b. Abraham also expresses crucial lessons about wealth and power: for the covenant people, they exist in a context of doing good [*Gen 13 & 14*]
 - c. Abraham learns the central issues of the Gospel, which frees us to be people of generous mercy: God’s blessings only come by the power of God’s promise, received through faith as a gift -- not by human strength [*Gen 15-17*]
 - d. Abraham becoming a blessing to the nations of the earth involves learning to be a compassionate intercessor for those who are oppressed by sin; a trait God has every intention of teaching his descendants [*Genesis 18:16-19; 19*]
4. There are so many lessons with Joseph that sometimes we miss one of the most fundamental points of his life story, namely, that God used him to mercifully provide basic food supplies for a large number of nations who would have otherwise starved from famine [*Gen 50:19,20*]
5. Abraham’s vast biological descendants through Isaac, Jacob and the Twelve Sons of Israel learn fundamental issues of justice and mercy during a four hundred year, Sovereignly appointed stay in Egypt as slaves. While part of that stay was to allow the Amorites’ sins to reach the full measure of the judgment that would come against them [*Gen 15:14, 15*], another part was the intentional experience of suffering God would permit his people to endure [*Gen 15:13*]. When they emerged, they would be forever identified in the preamble to the Ten Commandments as the people whom “the Lord your God brought out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” [*Exodus 20:2*] The net effect of that was to make them into a people of compassion as they dealt with slaves, immigrants and the poor [*Exodus 22:21-28*]
6. The Law -- and the summary of the Ten Commandments -- reveal the full measure of God’s justice/mercy and humility
- a. The warnings against idolatry and images are rooted in opposition to the “divine right” of kings and mighty men to oppress the poor and helpless [*cf Pharaoh; Psalm 82; 2 Kings 17:7-17*]
 - b. The people of Israel are not to take the Lord’s name upon them in a vain/empty way - and “in the name of God” pursue evil [*Jeremiah 7:1-11*]

- c. The Sabbath and all its related “rest” ordinances of financial and physical relief stand in stark contrast to the harsh labor of the nations around Israel [*cf Pharaoh, but also Solomon/Rehoboam I Kings 12*]
- d. Each of the remaining commands reflect a relationship of turning away from injustice and turning towards compassion
- e. The unfolding of the law in detail [*Exodus 21*] calls for compassion and justice in everything from the treatment of slaves (indentured servants) to an equitable protection of property, to male/female relationships and the protection of women, to social responsibility for the alien, the orphan, the widow and the poor, *versus the patterns of the nations around them [cf Lev 18:1ff, cf Joshua 24:14ff]*
- f. The great social justice framework that helped keep Israel from falling into patterns of oppression and becoming “like the nations” who surrounded them included the Annual Festivals, the Tithe and especially the Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year legislation [*Leviticus 23 and 25*]

Key as a background to all of this is God’s insistence that whatever wealth Israel possessed, including all the blessings of the land, were a gift, not to be hoarded, but to be used for a blessing to others. In addition it was meant to be central to Israel’s understanding that the land was really God’s, and they were his “tenants” who were there to do his will (doing good) with the property. He would bless them, and they would be free from worry about their needs [*Deut 8:10-18, Lev 25:18-24*].

- 7. As the people of Israel wrestle with idolatry and turning away from the true worship of God throughout their history, the heart of God’s indictment against them through the Prophets includes their failure to care about these issues of justice and compassion. The Prophets become the crucial voice of God to call his people back to repentance

[Isaiah 1:15-17; Jeremiah 5:28, 29; Amos 5:11,12; Ezekiel 18:5-13; Daniel 4:27; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:8-10; Malachi 3:5]

- 8. Despite his people’s failure, God’s great promise is that he will raise up “the Servant,” the true representative of Israel who will fulfill God’s righteousness. The book of Isaiah is the most thorough Old Testament promise and proclamation of the ministry of Christ. It is loaded with these issues of “the Servant” who has at the heart of his ministry, through the power of the Holy Spirit, a commitment to issues of justice and mercy [*Isaiah 9:7; Isaiah 11:4; Isaiah 42:1; Isaiah 61:1,2*]

9. In the exile, God again teaches his people to be a humble, servant people who know what it is to experience injustice and be the recipients of free, undeserved grace. This is meant to re-train their hearts so that when they return to the land, they will reject the idolatry and the oppression/injustice that had marked their lives, and they would once again become people of righteousness and compassion [*Isaiah 1:21-26; Jeremiah 29:7ff; cf I Peter*]
- B. The New Covenant Community of God's people, established with the coming of the Messiah, now fulfill God's call for his people to be a light to the world of God's goodness, justice, mercy and compassion, through grace
1. When Jesus comes he announces his ministry in the synagogue with a direct quote of Isaiah 58 and 61. [*Luke 4:16-19*] The Gospel writers then tell us story after story of how Jesus showed compassion and sought to establish justice by feeding the hungry, healing the sick, touching the outcast, liberating the oppressed from Satan's oppression and their own sin. And then he teaches his people the nature of his "kingdom" reign, rooted in God's grace, the forgiveness of sins and the free gift of salvation and sonship through faith in his name. He also calls his disciples to follow him in taking the compassionate love of God into the world
 2. Matthew shows us the nature of God's reign through Christ, and tells us how everyone was stunned and amazed by the expressions of God's mercy: Jesus heals the lepers [*Matthew 8:1ff*] and the servant of a hated Roman Centurion [*Mt 8:5ff*]; he shows compassion to Peter's mother-in-law with a fever [*Mt 8:14*] and the demon possessed. When he heals a paralyzed man and tells him his sins are forgiven, we are told the crowds "were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men" [*Mt 9:8*]

All these miraculous acts are simply expressions of mercy, compassion and justice. They are supernatural and do show us the power of God, but what is most crucial for us to see is that they show us the character of the God who loves us, and the character of his kingdom reign

3. Nonetheless, God's people have always wrestled with the nature of God's kingdom rule, even when Christ himself was present and demonstrating "how" God is committed to advancing his name in the earth. So when John the Baptist finds himself in prison and about to lose his life, he sends representatives to ask Jesus if he really is the Christ. Our Lord's answer of vindication that he is the Messiah is wrapped in terms of the expression of God's compassion and justice:

“Jesus replied, Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”
[Matthew 11:4-6]

4. The Pharisees

5. God’s call for his kingdom righteousness expressed through the Church -- the “ekklesia”

The great promises of God for his salvation purpose among the nations of the earth is rooted in the issues of making the church into a people who will live out these same issues of justice and compassion

a. Isaiah tells us:

“In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many people will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.’ The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, o house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” *[Isaiah 2:1-5]*

God promises that he is going to redeem a people for himself from among all the nations of the earth and they will be marked, not by anger and war, but by works of caring for basic human need. This is the Old Testament precursor to Matthew 28:18ff

b. When John the Baptist announces the great arrival of the Messiah, he leads the way by calling people to repentance around these very issues. In response to his call to repentance the people ask what they should do. John’s answer:

The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same. Tax collectors [asked], ‘Teacher, what should we do? Don’t collect anymore than you are required to’, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, ‘And what should we do?’

He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.'" [Luke 3:10-14]

- c. As Jesus leads his disciples and teaches the larger nation of Israel, he constantly refers to the reality of eternal life and the presence of God's salvation and kingdom in mercy and justice terms. The parable of the Good Samaritan [Luke 10] is in answer to "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" We know from all the rest of Scripture that salvation is not by works, it is only received as a gift by grace. The real question is – where will the presence of God's grace lead us? The answer -- to being people like the Samaritan.

When Zaccheus the tax collector is touched by the love of God through Christ, his response is, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus responds, "Today salvation has come to this house...." [Luke 19:7-10]

As Jesus describes the long time period that we all must endure until his final return, he tells his disciples parables of the kingdom. At the heart of those parables is the message of God's grace, love, and endurance available through the Holy Spirit. But when the Lord returns, the kingdom "investment" he will have been looking for from his people revolve around these issues of compassion [Matthew 25:31-36 cf. Isa 58]

- d. At the inauguration of the New Testament church in the book of Acts, we are told by Luke of the things that Jesus began to do and to teach [Acts 1:1], and the result of the forgiveness of sins through the work of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is a profound demonstration of compassion and justice [Acts 2:38ff., Acts 4:32ff]
- e. As the church grew, the need arose for deacons who would be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to further address these very issues - in the first major case, the daily distribution of food to widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food [Acts 7]
- f. When the issue of salvation by grace alone was brought to the Jerusalem council, the Jewish Apostles addressed Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, acknowledging his ministry and gospel message and, Paul tells us, "All they asked was that we should remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." [Galatians 2:10]

- g. When Paul prays for the church, he constantly uses phrases referring to the kingdom of God and to righteousness [*Phil 1:8-10 , Col 1:9-14*]
- h. James, who is a New Testament version of the Old Testament Prophets, tells us that God's heart has not changed [*James 1:27, 2:5-7, 14ff*]
- i. The Apostle John unequivocally unites the experience of the love of God in the Gospel with the expression of acts of compassion and mercy [*1 John 3:16ff*]
- j. Finally, Paul tells us that the work of the Elders and other church leaders is to "equip God's people for works of service, so that the body may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith, and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" [*Eph 4:12,13*]

Trials: God's Means of Spiritual Maturity

JOYFULLY EMBRACING TRIALS

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:2-4

Trials are something we want to joyfully embrace as God's people because we recognize they are necessary for us to become like Christ in this world, maturing in our expression as the people of God who are the light of the world, manifesting his righteousness, compassion and humility, with the confident hope of the final redemption of all things.

- I. You need your faith tested in trials, so that you can develop perseverance. You need to develop perseverance because ***perseverance is the only thing*** that brings maturity in the kind of character God wants to produce in us.

Romans 5:1-5 -- *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

The trials God allows, and even at times leads us into, are directly related to the quality of character he wants to produce in us: humility, compassion, justice [Cf Hebrews 2:10-11]

- A. Why persevering is so necessary to maturity

Real growth takes place when we actively believe our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father for all He is and all He promises; and out of that context of faith, new obedience comes forth and our character is changed. Trials are the means God uses to work that growth in us.

- B. Persevering in the midst of trial is the means of growth for God's people from Genesis to Revelation

Abraham - the birth of Isaac

Isaac - the births/raising of Esau and Jacob

Jacob - the births of the 12 tribes, the history of sojourning

Joseph - exaltation for God's purposes through betrayal

Israel - 430 years in Egypt; the Exodus

Deut 8:1-5 -- *Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you.*

Judges 2:20-23 -- *Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant that I laid down for their forefathers and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did." The LORD had allowed those nations to remain; he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua.*

David's 20 year journey to the throne [Cf 1 Samuel 24:11ff, 26:22ff]

- C. Persevering through trial is how Jesus Christ himself matured and learned obedience

Matthew 4:1ff, cf Hebrews 5:7-8 -- *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*

- II. Why we have the freedom to embrace trials

- A. Our faith is strong enough - that is, the "faith" God has deposited in us

1 Peter 1:3-7 -- *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith-- of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire -- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

When we persevere and see God deliver and discover that our faith will not fail, that in turn gives us a great hope, that will not be disappointed, because we know God's love is faithful and real [*Romans 5:1-5*]

- B. The freedom to endure the trial comes from the "rest" God provides us right in the midst of the trial [*Hebrews 4:1-13*]

This "rest" is the Sabbath blessings and comes to its greatest expression in the Old Testament in the Year of Jubilee [*Lev 25:8ff*]. God provides forgiveness of sins; freedom from oppression; restoration of all things; and overall "shalom."

- C. Recognizing that trial is the way to maturity, and not a road block, means we don't worry about looking for a quick fix.

That means you must take the approach of being willing to stay in the trial until you see God accomplish His purpose [Cf Joseph, Moses, David]

It also means the presence of pain is not the signal it's time for you to quit.

III. What makes up these trials?

James says it: all kinds of things. The stupid, sinful, rebellious things people do (and we ourselves can do), as well as the incredibly evil, destructive things people do (and we ourselves can do), as well as all the "natural" problems of living in a fallen world – sickness, disease, and death, as well as the great spiritual oppression Satan brings against us as we stand in the darkness and be light.

The almost unbelievable news is that there are this many opportunities for us to mature in our faith.

**WISDOM AND FAITH:
OUR CHARACTER AND THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF GOD'S JUSTICE**

*"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does."
James 1:5-8*

Recognizing that trials are the way to maturing the people of God, not a roadblock, we believe that God will give us the wisdom we need not only to make it through the trial to maturity, but also the wisdom to see his justice/righteousness accomplished.

- I. Understanding what "wisdom" is
 - A. God granting you wisdom does not mean. . .
 1. ... He is going to give you what you immediately want: an answer to how to end the trial
 2. ... He is going to show you how to change other people
 3. ... He is going to give you all the details of how a given situation will end, so you can answer all your unresolved questions.
 - B. The heart of God's wisdom for you is this: helping you understand how he wants to change you as you endure the trial, both to thoroughly equip you for doing his will, and then giving wisdom on how to apply/work out his justice and righteousness in your given situation.
 1. God is after shaping your character. He is after teaching you to believe in Him; fellowship with Him and know His love, holiness and power in greater measure; and teaching you to obey Him by making His love known in new and deeper ways [*Phil 1:9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:9,10; Hebrews 12:11; 1 Peter 1:7*]
 2. The wisdom of God is rooted in a leading, directing and guiding of the Holy Spirit that enables you to understand the outworking of righteousness (the Covenant Law of Gen - Deut, given full expression in the Sermon on the Mount) in life today.

Isaiah 11:1-5 (cf Psalm 72); 1 Cor 1:30,31 (cf Jeremiah 9:23,24)

II. “Wisdom” is ours as a free gift

When you go to God to ask for wisdom, He does not measure it out according to your sinlessness; He doesn’t hold your sin against you. You are His son/daughter, who is loved and completely righteous in His sight and He is glad you have come and will generously give you what you need [*cf Luke 11:11*]

III. In order to gain and benefit from God’s wisdom, you must have a humble heart of faith.

A. Genuine faith does not require the total absence of any shadow of doubt. It does mean that you will submit your doubts to the Lord. *If you give yourself over to doubt, you won’t get the wisdom you need, because you won’t be listening to God, you will be listening to your circumstances and the self-justifying character of your sin nature.*

B. Believing God to give you wisdom does mean ...

1. ... you humble your heart to listen

2. ... you acknowledge God’s Word as true, knowing the affirmation of its trustworthiness is Jesus Christ Himself who loved you, died for you, and lives for you

TAKING PRIDE IN YOUR HUMBLE POSITION

“The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wildflower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business. Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.” James 1:9-12

Recognizing that trial is the way to maturity, not a roadblock, we gladly accept that it is in the midst of poverty and humble circumstances that the greatest opportunity for God’s glory arises.

- I. Poverty - broadly defined - is a place of high esteem in God’s sight
 - A. What that does not mean:
 1. That God wants people to go without food, shelter and clothing
 2. That God is opposed to good financial management
 3. That wealth is a curse
 4. That the place of poverty is equal to righteousness
 - B. What it does mean: poverty helps keep things in perspective
 1. Your resources can become, in a limited way, our focus for determining how much we will believe God to accomplish
 2. The resources themselves can become our rationale for the changes that take shape, and your future hope for good things to continue
 3. God wants you and everybody else to know that trusting God alone is the source of life

Lacking the resources you (and everybody else) think you need, is precisely the place where God is able to work a deliverance that will cause men to acknowledge it is the hand of God alone that has and will work salvation.

- II. We are committed to boasting in our poverty
 - A. Not with a spirit of self-righteous judgementalism
 - B. Not with a spirit of carelessness and irresponsibility
 - C. But with a spirit of glad dependence on God
 - 1. It is a “naturally” hard place to be
 - 2. But the end rewards far outweigh the present costs

SIN IS OUR PROBLEM: GRACE IS GOD'S SOLUTION

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown, gives birth to death. Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.” James 1:13-18

I. The Problem of Sin in the Middle of Trials

A. Trials have an effect of exposing deep patterns of sin within us -

If we live by grace, we know this is a good thing, so sin can be repented of and renewal and change take place

B. In a self-defensive reaction we want to blame God

C. Characteristics of a blame-shifting spirit

Cf Saul - I Samuel 15:13ff

II. The Answer of God's Grace: God gives only good gifts; he has in fact given us birth

A. Having given us His own Son, how will he not also along with Him graciously give us all things [Romans 8]

B. Humbly accept the word planted in you, which is able to save you

C. Commit to obedience

New City Fellowship Core Values Class: Trials – Wisdom and Faith – our character and the accomplishment of God’s Justice

The book of James as a focused theology for going through trials the way God intends.

- What God offers: James 1:5-7 – Ask for Wisdom
 - Belief vs. Doubt
 - Framed in economic realities (1:9-11) – boasting in poverty
 - Endurance vs. Temptation (1:12-18)
 - Checking your state of mind (1:19-21)
 - Guard against anger
 - Accept the Word
 - Obedience flowing through faith
 - Why the focus on the orphan and the widow and keeping yourself from being unstained?
- Pitfalls to avoid when dealing with Trials
 - Replacing mercy / identification with the poor with envy / favoritism towards the rich (2:1-13)
 - Cultural values / controls that exclude or displace / undervalue the poor
 - Quite possibly a means of dodging the painful trials or positioning ourselves to moderate them
 - Does not mean that we are never to enjoy the good gifts from God or that we should not make financially sound / accountable decisions

- Thinking that a theological understanding of mercy is the same as living a life of mercy towards others (2:14-26)
 - Not enough to try to avoid living a self-serving life – we need to be filled with mercy that is active towards others
 - Key element of wisdom from God in the face of trials

- Self Righteousness (3:1-12)
 - Evidenced in how we speak about others – particularly when we are in conflict – cursing, boasting about bitter jealousy and selfish ambition – many times expressed when we feel like we have been “wronged” or treated unfairly by others
 - Instead we ought to be peacemakers, through wisdom from heaven.

- Self-Indulgence or the Love of Money 4:1-5:6
 - Driven by desires to have
 - The reality is that it is completely in opposition to the call of God to belong to Him
 - Looks like good vision / drive for success – but ignores the presence of God’s kingdom agenda in the day to day tasks and decisions
 - Accumulation of wealth, luxurious living and self indulgence IS oppressive to the poor

- Hitting the reset button (5:7-20)
 - Patience in suffering
 - Pray, pray, pray > fellowship with God and with His family

A Preliminary Biblical-Theological Understanding of Reconciliation in the Covenant

Reconciliation in the Old Testament

Are there Covenantal obligations and teachings of the Old Testament that speak directly to our responsibility to be reconciled?

There are at least two important reasons for asking this question. First, God's moral character does not change. If reconciliation is a moral issue, a matter of true righteousness which calls for a reversing of the division and segregation caused by sin and is truly a part of the eternal purpose of God, then we would expect to find a call to righteousness in reconciliation spelled out, even if in seed form only, in the Old Covenant. Second, as with every other moral issue, the Covenantal obligations laid out in the Old Testament would prove crucial for understanding the fuller expression of reconciliation required of the church in the New Testament.

The Call for Reconciliation in the Genesis Account

On the most basic level, Adam's fall into sin brought a kind of death that is defined by separation, or for the purpose of emphasis here, segregation (Gen 3). Many theologians have pointed out the clear implications of death entering the human race through Adam as man's separation from God, from each other, from himself and from creation. If God's agenda in salvation is the complete reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:9), it would seem that must include not only a profound reconciliation to God but also a profound reconciliation to one another.

While the term "reconciliation" does not exist in the Old Testament, if we look at the biblical narrative with this theological issue in mind, we will find there is an abundance of evidence of a clear, moral, Covenantal call to a deep, practical expression of reconciliation. More specifically, if we read the Scriptures with a view towards Israel's responsibilities to immigrants, or aliens, we are going to see the call of God to practice reconciliation is clearly woven throughout the entire fabric of the history of redemption. Like much of biblical truth and revelation, the call to reconciliation is in seed form early on in the Genesis narrative, gets expanded upon throughout the Law, grows into being a part of the great fullness of God's salvation promised through the coming Messiah in the Prophets, reaches its climactic accomplishment in the ministry of Christ, and is then embedded in the DNA of the church as part of our foundational nature as the people of God. We can begin by stepping back and examining the Covenantal backdrop of God's commitment to reconciliation in the narratives of Adam, Noah and Abraham.

The whole book of Genesis functioned as a Divine history lesson for the Hebrew people, just as it does for us. God's revelation in Genesis unfolds his original purposes for all creation and especially for his crowning achievement: mankind, made in his image. The disastrous sin of

Adam and the near destruction of the world in Noah's day reveal the glorious story of God's astounding love and covenant faithfulness to redeem and save, despite the evil intentions of men. **Genesis 1-11 functions as a preamble to Israel's specific role as the "least of the nations" chosen by God, through the promises to Abraham, to bring his salvation to the whole earth. The reconciliation purposes of God are revealed in this narrative in the most basic descriptions of God's overarching plans for mankind, and for Israel as his chosen people**

The Unity of Mankind in the Covenant with Adam

Every believer familiar with Scripture would acknowledge the dignity of all human beings as created in the image of God. Genesis 1-3 emphasizes God as the Sovereign Creator of all things and especially as the Creator of all peoples through the universal fatherhood of Adam and Eve: "Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living." Gen 3:20

The rub, so to speak, comes in the practical implications. Even as late as 1787 in the Constitution of the United States of America, slaves were assigned a value of three fifths (3/5) of a person for purposes of representation and taxation. As noted earlier, in that same year, the African Methodist Episcopal Church started when African members of the white dominated Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia discovered just how far American Methodists would go to enforce racial discrimination against African Americans.

By contrast, **in this formative Covenant document for the people of God, the Lord was making a very distinct point in revealing himself as the God of all the nations. For the Israelites to acknowledge every other ethnic group as equally created by God and endowed with the very same image of God as themselves, was an idea that stood radically opposite to the ethnocentric creation myths of the surrounding pagan cultures Israel was called to bless. As Harvey Conn points out in his lectures on "The Old Testament and the Poor"¹ the false religions and gods of the nations that surrounded Israel were a collection of myths and distorted stories created by the political/religious leaders of their age to spin their own explanations of life and, in the end, to justify the existence of the elite, ruling class who freely oppressed the poor. The cultures of the Ancient Near East, as a general rule, not only oppressed women, but also used their pagan religious teachings to feed an ethnocentric ideal that further justified the oppression of people from different ethnic groups.² The Babylonian gods were only concerned with Babylon. The Egyptian gods were only concerned with Egypt, etc. God took time in the Genesis narrative to set Himself apart as the One, true God who created women with a special status and, gloriously, created all mankind in His image. This revelation would break the entrenched myths and patterns of oppression and division that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had lived under in Egypt for over 400 years. God was giving his people Israel a global, universal perspective on the dignity of the nations as well as a clear revelation that he always had an active, Sovereign hand working for salvation and judgment among all the people of the earth. His purposes are laden with reconciliation implications that become clear as the Law unfolds.**

¹ Dr. Harvey Conn, *The Old Testament and the Poor* Lecture 1 Westminster Media

² *ibid*

Seeds of Reconciliation in the Covenant with Noah

The emphasis on Israel's connectedness to the other nations continues in the account of Noah, who functions as a type of new Adam. In a newly re-birthered world, he is the one physical father of all the nations. Within the story of the division and dispersing of the nations, there is a pointed reminder of our basic unity in Noah. **Genesis 6-11 reaffirms the universal connection of the nations through the account of Noah both in his calling to re-establish the original Covenant with Adam to "be fruitful and multiply and cover the face of the earth" (Gen 1:28, cf. 9:7) and in the listing of the table of nations, "These are the clans of Noah's sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the face of the earth after the flood." Genesis 10:32**

God's specific, detailed discussion of the table of nations in Genesis 10 is more than simply background material to the real story- the story of Israel. It is in fact, the main point for their (and our) story- that these are the nations they are to bless and ultimately help give spiritual birth to (Gen 12:1-3, Isa 26:17,18). As many others have pointed out, the story of the tower of Babel is reversed on the day of Pentecost when Jesus Christ, the real "second Adam" (Romans 5) began a reconciliation process that would extend to all the nations of the earth.

The Budding of Reconciliation in the Covenant with Abraham

When we turn to the Covenant with Abraham, God's commitment to reconciliation starts to rise to more and more prominence. There is a traditional theological approach to Genesis that wants to emphasize a "narrowing" of God's focus to the descendants of Abraham, in an exclusionary way, as the true people of God. This theological mindset can mistakenly feed our own ethnocentric Christianity even as it fed the pride and ethnocentricity of many Jews. There is a narrowing of focus in the narrative. But **the focus on Abraham is never meant to be an ethnic exclusion of other nations from Israel's thinking; instead it is meant to heighten their understanding of God's grace that called them into existence as a nation for the purpose of achieving God's global salvation.**

- The promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 are set in relationship to the table of nations in Genesis 10 and the division of the nations in Genesis 11. When Abraham is called as the man through whom the Messiah will come, the promise is stated in reference to all the descendants of Adam/Noah: **"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** Gen 12:3. That means the division of the nations as a judgment exercised by God in Genesis 11 is already on its way to being reversed in Genesis 12 through the blessing of salvation given to Abraham, who will become the father of many nations and a blessing to all. The reconciliation of all men and all things through Christ Jesus (Eph 1:9,10) is already foreshadowed in the Abrahamic Covenant.

- In Genesis 17 the inclusive, reconciling nature of God's salvation among the nations is emphasized in the sign of the covenant, circumcision, when Abraham is promised,

“No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham for I have made you the father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner- those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. Any uncircumcised male...will be cut off from his people.” Genesis 17:12-13

Abraham will be the spiritual father of many nations. The sign of the Covenant is not to be given on the basis of ethnic heritage in an exclusionary form, but on the basis of covenantal relationship. Everyone who is in a faith-Covenant relationship with God, even purchased slaves, are part of the Covenant family and must be given the sign of the Covenant. **As the Scriptures will more fully reveal as the story unfolds, that Covenant sign brought with it the full rights and obligations of the Covenant family.**

God’s Call to Reconciliation Practices Expanded in the Covenant with Moses

When we come to the establishment of Israel as a nation-state who would uniquely reflect the righteousness of God and be the conduit of his blessing to the nations, the demand for practicing reconciliation is more pronounced. In particular, the place of the alien (stranger or foreigner) takes on a prominent position in God’s detailed commands for his people to practice reconciliation. Nine (9) times in the Exodus to Canaan narrative (Ex-Deut) God talks about Israel’s personal experience as aliens and the things they suffered, and uses that as a moral reminder of their need to show compassion and not mistreat, in general, any alien in their midst (Ex 23:21, 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19). In sixty (60) additional references in the books of Exodus-Deuteronomy, God addresses the treatment of the alien or foreigner, who are described as “living among you” or “within your gates” (Ex 20:10; Lev 16:19; Deut 1:16, 5:14). Just in Deuteronomy, in their final preparation before entering the land of Canaan, the Lord addresses the people of Israel and their response to the alien/foreigner twenty-six (26) times.

How many other ethnic groups actually lived with the people of Israel? No one knows for sure. **There is a hint of the diversity in the Exodus narrative when we are told, “many other people (Hebrew: “a mixture of peoples” Greek LXX: “a swarm of foreigners”) went up with them” (Ex 12:38).³ What is clear is that their relationship with other ethnic groups was a vital part of their life as the people of God. As we will see, every single historic event in the history of Israel includes direct commands and instructions on how they were to treat non-ethnic Jews.**

As we look at these passages of Scripture dealing with the place of foreigners in the life of Israel, **we need to address an important distinction. Some of the passages in Exodus-Deuteronomy address the responsibility of Israel, in general, to the resident alien. God called his people to practice a kind of compassion and justice for the foreigner among them that was unlike the normally oppressive practices of other Near Eastern Cultures towards different**

³ Keil-Delitzsch “Commentary on the Old Testament” Vol. 1, pp. 29,30 Eerdmans 1978

ethnic groups. Even household slaves were to be given a Sabbath day of rest (Ex 20:8-11). General laws of justice were to be equally applied to all (Deut 1:16,17). Israel was to keep in mind their own experience as aliens in Egypt as a practical reminder of what injustice felt like (Ex 23:9), and they were also called to image the moral nature of God, who “loves the alien” (Deut 10:19). The Law called the people of Israel to practice a type of kindness and compassion for the foreigner, the stranger and the slave that had nothing to do with their covenantal status. The call to compassion for foreigners is an expression of the nature of God, who shows kindness to all without prejudice (Mt 5:43ff) being reflected in his people. This type of command is found in Leviticus 19:33, 34

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

But there is another set of commands that have a more specific focus concerning Israel's response to aliens and strangers who have freely entered into covenant relationship with God. In these texts, we see more clearly foreshadowed an explicit call for what the New Testament narrative refers to as reconciliation - the full, equal inclusion and just treatment of non-Hebrews who had attached themselves to the Covenant. These commands throughout Exodus – Deuteronomy are more than a reminder to be good neighbors to the immigrants and aliens who happened to make Canaan their temporary home and, in addition, to care for those foreigners who were servants and slaves. This is an Old Testament call for his people to practice genuine and full reconciliation with the immigrants who became members of the Covenant family.

The evidence for this practical expression of reconciliation is found in the very events in which Israel was founded as a nation and would mark her history forever: **the Exodus and the Passover.**

"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "These are the regulations for the Passover: "No foreigner is to eat of it. Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it. It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you." Exodus 12:43-49

As noted, when Israel left Egypt “many other people (Hebrew: “a mixture of peoples” LXX: “a swarm of foreigners”) went up with them” (Ex 12:38). Apparently other oppressed nations saw the deliverance of God on behalf of the Israelites and decided to cast their lot with the Hebrews. The Israelites needed instruction on how to treat non-Hebrews. The significance of issuing this command on the very day of the Exodus can hardly be overstated. **The difference between the status of the foreigner in the community of God's people and the practice of the**

other Ancient Near Eastern cultures provided a stark contrast. The Hebrews had seen the ills of ethnic superiority demonstrated in the Egyptian culture, not just against themselves, but against all non-Egyptians. That superiority / exclusion was clearly expressed in the refusal to fellowship at the meal table. Genesis 43:32, "...Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians." This is the corollary issue Paul addresses in Galatians 2 when Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles. He was acting like a "pagan", not in line with the Gospel. The practical exclusion of other ethnic groups from intimate "meal" fellowship with us is a denial of God's equal acceptance of all of us as members of his family through adoption.

Yet here, in the most precious, the most holy meal for the people of God, the meal celebrating redemption, the alien who was circumcised was invited to enjoy the feast as a full participating member of the community. In fact the admonition is startling: "he may take part like one born in the land."

This explanation for the requirement of circumcision in order to eat the Passover meal was not a one-time point of administrative clarification for a one time, historic and special event. If it were, it would be hard to argue that God was making a moral demand for reconciliation. Instead, what we find throughout the Law and the Prophets is an often-repeated demand from God that clearly and forcefully called upon the Hebrews to recognize and grant full rights, full privileges, and full inclusion in the Covenant community to the alien or foreigner who attached themselves to God through circumcision. Their struggle with tendencies of racism and exclusion were evident early in their national history. Moses had married a North African, Cushite wife, which became the basis for racial prejudice and questioning his position of leadership (Numbers 12:1ff). As we will see later, Israel's failure to practice reconciliation was listed among the fundamental reasons for the exile and one of the first issues addressed when they returned from Babylon.

The place of the circumcised, covenantally-bound alien in the community life of Israel, both in terms of privileges and responsibilities, is spelled out at several crucial points in the Covenant documents. After providing instructions regarding the various types of sacrifices and the work of the priests on behalf of the people, God gives regulations for the climactic offering on the annual Day of Atonement. This is a sacrifice for the "whole community of Israel" (Lev 16:17); for "the Israelites" (16:19); for "the people" (16:24), for "all the people of the community" (16:33). And who is included in this description?

"This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work-- whether native-born or an alien living among you-- because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins." Lev 16:29,30

The implication that the atonement was made for the alien (those who had entered into a covenant relationship with God) as well as the native-born Israelite becomes more clear in Leviticus 17 when all the restrictions and obligations are equally applied to both groups:

"Say to them: 'Any Israelite or any alien living among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to the LORD-- that man must be cut off from his people.'" Lev 17:8,9

These are not simply foreigners who are temporary residents, but non-Hebrews who have entered a covenantal relationship with God. They are making sacrifices to God that is "a pleasing aroma to the Lord" (Num 15:14-16). The status of acceptance and inclusion accorded these aliens who were members of the Covenant community should have been obvious to the people of God. But the obvious eluded Israel, just like it eludes us. So the Law, as part of its needed function in their lives (and ours), gives explicit instructions on how to treat them. The substance of those instructions reveal that God required his people to treat these believing foreigners as equals, with the same status and privilege as the natural born descendants of Abraham.

An example of this equality in the community is found in the story of Ruth, the Moabitess, who announces to her mother-in-law Naomi, "your people will be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth is not only received as a member of the community, all the rights of the kinsman-redeemer are applied to her through Boaz. God's ultimate evidence of her status in the community is the privilege she is given of being David's great grandmother and part of the ancestral line of Jesus (Ruth 4:13ff, Mt 1:5). As an added twist of God's clear commitment to reconciliation in the Old Testament narrative, Boaz, the husband of Ruth, was also the son of Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who helped Joshua and the Israelite army overthrow Jericho (Mt 1:5). This kind of "community embracing" of someone from a different, and even despised ethnic group is a practical demonstration of reconciliation that goes beyond what most contemporary churches practice. We need to remember that these Old Testament laws and historical examples were only a shadow of the full light of God's glory that is meant to shine through the church.

The point of Ruth's story is that it was not just some of the Laws in Israel which applied to the alien who had become part of the covenant community, it was that all the laws applied; including the laws for the use of tithes (Deut 14), the laws of loaning money without interest (Deut 15), the laws of protection of property (Lev 25) and the laws of "joyful celebration" at the annual feasts (Deut 16). To live in Israel and be in covenant with God meant to be in community and covenant *with* his people for both the blessings and the curses, the obligations and the promises of the Covenant.

"For the generations to come, whenever an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to the LORD, he must do exactly as you do. The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.'" Numbers 15:14-16

“And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.... Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.” Deut 10:16-19

The not-so-obvious question for church leaders in both denominational structures, as well as local congregations is simply this: do we treat people from other ethnic and socio-economic groups as complete equals?

The Covenantal call for the intentional practice of reconciliation is actually heightened by giving special status to the alien in the Law.

There is a second set of references to the Covenantal position of the alien throughout the Genesis-Deuteronomy narrative. **God’s demand for reconciliation not only required the inclusion of aliens with the same rights and responsibilities of the ethnically Hebrew people of God, the aliens were actually given a heightened, special status.**

Part of the great revelation of God’s moral character is that he is not like the tyrant-gods of Egypt or Canaan or Babylon, but the One, True, Holy God, who is set apart from evil and full of righteousness, goodness and compassion. As the one true God it is his very character to give special care to those who are the most vulnerable- the widow, the orphan, the poor, and tellingly, the foreigner. The Old Testament Scriptures often link these groups of people together- Lev 19:10, 23;22; Deut 10:18, 24:17-21, 26:12,13, 27:19. By grouping the alien with the widow, the orphan and the poor he is recognizing them as part of a category of people who could be easily disenfranchised from the benefits of the Covenant. These are people who can be taken advantage of or simply ignored because they lack normal access to social status and power. To be the “people of God,” who know God and reflect His character, means being a people who will demonstrate the opposite of oppression or neglect. It means his people will demonstrate an active caring and a compassionate sensitivity to the needs of the excluded and neglected. The church is to be a community of people who reflect the glory of God in caring for all the disenfranchised, counteracting the normal abuses of the dominant culture.

The Law is dotted with admonitions that reflect this special status, which is to be accorded the foreigner as part of the disenfranchised groups.

- Leviticus 19:10 “Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for *the poor and the alien*”

Deuteronomy 24:19 “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for *the alien, the fatherless and the widow*, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” Cf Lev 23:22 ; Deut 24:17, 20, 21; 26:12, 13; 27:19

- Deut 10:16-19 reveals the moral weightiness of this status in the eyes of God:

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.”

- Deuteronomy 14:28-29 (cf. 26:12-15) spells out the practical implications of this in the use of tithes:

“At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites...and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows...may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

- Deuteronomy 16:9-14 pre-shadows the ingathering of all the nations of the earth at the Feast of Weeks and is to be celebrated with rejoicing. It is not simply a polite tacked-on statement that the alien is to be included. Their presence prefigures the very substance of what this Feast promises, the ultimate ingathering of the nations. Their inclusion with all the other disenfranchised groups emphasizes again the character of the One True God.

“Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles...before the Lord your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your men-servants and maidservants, the Levites in your town and the aliens, fatherless and widows living among you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and follow carefully these decrees.”

- Deuteronomy 24:14-21 addresses general social legislation for the special care of the poor and vulnerable, and in each issue addressed –just and prompt wages, proactive justice, food from the harvest- the alien is included as one who is to be given special attention.

“Do not take advantage of a hired man who is poor and needy, whether he is a brother Israelite or an alien living in one of your towns. Pay him his wages at sunset.... Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge.... When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back and get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

These related sets of commands get to the heart of Gods prohibition against the practice of racism, tribalism or exclusion of someone who is either ethnically or socially “marginal”: it is the abuse of status and power. Those who are dominant members of any society are always in a position of power. Reconciliation in its most basic, practical expression includes a commitment to use positions of power and privilege for the good of the naturally excluded. The great contrast between the people of God and all the other peoples of the earth is that

we are image-bearers of God and are called to use whatever power we have to be servant-kings, servant-leaders, servant-men and women; a servant-community which actively works for the good of those who are at a place of disadvantage. This is the great statement of Jesus on the difference between God's view of authority/leadership, and the view of non-believing gentiles (Luke 22:24ff). To oppress the alien is to violate the covenant with God. To exclude someone from the full blessings of the Covenant based on ethnic origin is to break faith with the very character of God - the compassionate Savior of all mankind.

Can we imagine the practical significance this type of theological understanding and commitment would have had on the church in the newly developing United States if all foreigners, including slaves, who heard and responded to the Gospel, were given the full status of community rights and blessing within the church? The question however is not simply an historical curiosity. What would be the effect today if, in the United States, the culturally dominant white church repented and began to live out her true calling to the African-American believers, as well as embracing the immigrant and refugee groups who are entering their cities and communities? And not only in the States, but in every region of the world where tribalism and socio-economic exclusion is too much the norm in the church?

The Old Testament Prophets continue to make the Covenantal call to genuine reconciliation clear to the people of God and give it heightened attention in their prophetic words.

As the Prophets indict Israel for her failure to keep the Covenant with God, there are two patterns of sin that are constantly emphasized: idolatry and the sister sin of refusal to properly care for the marginalized in society, including the foreigner, the poor and oppressed (cf. Isaiah 1:15-17, 2:8; Jeremiah 2:1-12, 5:27-29; Ezekiel 5:8-10, 22:23-29; Amos 2:4, 5:11-13; Micah 1:3-7, 6:9-13). God's design for his Covenant people to reflect his image in contrast to the ungodly nations around them, and their status as "a nation of priests" (Exodus 19:2) to the rest of the world was severely reduced, reshaped and even rejected by Israel through disobedience, idolatry and syncretism with the world cultures. As a result, love for the poor, the oppressed, the alien and by extension, the lost nations, was replaced with oppressive practices of economic and social injustice, passive indifference and the pursuit of a religiously justified personal kingdom building of private wealth and power (Isaiah 1-5).

Isaiah's indictment in Isaiah 5:8 of the abuse of the power of the wealthy who "add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live in the land alone," reads like an accusation written for the modern American suburb. Many U.S. suburban communities developed as "white flight"- a means of effectively removing both blacks and the poor from the neighborhood.

The Prophets not only reminded the people of God of their Covenant obligations to the non-Hebrew believers, they also emphasized God's great global and cosmic saving purposes. Anointed by the Spirit of God, they gave expanded understanding to God's intention to save and reconcile a people to himself and to one another from among all the nations of the earth through the work of the coming Messiah, fulfilling the promise to Abraham.

At the heart of this salvation is an inclusion of all ethnic groups as the one worshipping, fellowshiping, faithful and righteous people of God. The detailed promises of the fullness of

God's salvation in the last days and the descriptions of the work of the Messiah all contain repeated emphasis on this reconciliation of former enemies both to God and to one another.

- Amos spends most of his prophetic energies denouncing the people of Israel and Judah for their failure to live up the demands of the Covenant to practice justice and mercy on behalf of the oppressed. He often simply refers to them in general terms as "the poor" or "the needy" or "the oppressed", but we know from the Gen-Deut background that this is a general term that specifically includes the widow, the fatherless and the alien (Amos 2:6,7; 3:9,10; 4:1-3; 5:7-12, 24; 8:4-6). The importance of this rebuke as it relates to the alien is revealed in the conclusion of Amos' prophetic ministry as he promises the gracious, last days fulfillment of God's salvation with these words: "In that day I will restore David's fallen tent...so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name, declares the Lord..." Amos 9:11,12. The Apostle James quotes this passage in Acts 15:13ff as proof that God has given Covenant status to those from the Gentile nations who put their faith in Christ.
- Hosea promises Israel that after their exile, "...the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people', they will be called 'sons of the living God'" (1:10, 11). Paul tells us in Romans 9:25, 26 that this vast number of "Israelites" was actually made up of a people God called for himself from the Gentile nations.
- Micah and Isaiah echo the same Prophetic promise about the days of the Messiah and the picture of all nations reconciled to God and each other is expanded.

"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.' The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." Isaiah 2:1-4, Micah 4:1-3.

These redeemed and reconciled nations learn to put the just, compassionate Covenant Law of God into practice and are changed from nations who oppress each other into a people who work for each other's good. The only way to justify the continued separation and exclusion of another people group from deep, practical connection and relationship with one another, is to reduce the demands of the Covenant in such a way that we do not have to care for one another's needs or engage in the task of bringing this mercy to the world.

Isaiah, which contains the most extensive promises of the work of the Messiah, also contains the most extensive promises of the reconciliation of the nations to God and each other. The heart of the message is like a rising tide throughout Isaiah. The Messiah will fulfill God's call on behalf of his people to be the Servant who lives out the justice, mercy and compassion the Covenant required and as a result of his obedience,

the “alien” who attaches himself to Israel will become a countless multitude of men, women and children from every nation on earth who will be cherished and embraced by God in the midst of his Covenant people. They will ultimately become the full expression of the people of God who are empowered by His Spirit to bring God’s justice to the nations of the earth as the kingdom of priests, which he intended all along.

•Isaiah 9:7 “Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.”

•Isaiah 11:3,4 “...He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth .”

•Isaiah 14:1, 2 “...Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Israel. Nations will take them and bring them to their own place. And the house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the Lord’s land.”

•Isaiah 19:23-25 “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance.’”

•Isaiah 25:6-8 “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples.... On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.”

•Isaiah 26:17-19 “As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O Lord. We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to the people of the world.’ But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You, who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.”

•Isaiah 42:1-4 “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.... He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.”

•Isaiah 49:6 “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob.... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

•Isaiah 56:3-7 “Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let not any eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’ ...to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off.

And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.”

Jeremiah addresses the issue of idolatry as he warns the people of Judah of their certain exile. The practice of idolatry, either falsely misrepresenting the nature of who God is, or outright replacing him with a god who is more to our liking, is at the root of racism. It is the only way we can justify neglect or the outright oppression or exclusion of the marginal members of society, including the alien. Jeremiah addresses the practical results of Judah’s idolatry: they failed to take special care of the poor and needy and the alien in their midst. While we know from the rest of Scripture and personal experience that we all sin in many ways, and that Jeremiah could have highlighted any number of failures, he emphasizes the sins of neglect and oppression of the poor and alien as the full fruit of idolatry.

- Jeremiah 5: 27-29 “Like cages full of birds, their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful....they do not plead the case of the fatherless....they do not defend the rights of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?”

- Jeremiah 7:5-7 “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow...then I will let you live in this place....”

- Jeremiah 9:23-24 “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom...but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight.”

- Jeremiah 22:3-4 “This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right.... Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow...for if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace....”

- Jeremiah 22:15-16 The practice of inclusion and the special care and consideration given to the disenfranchised, including the alien, is at the very heart of knowing God. Anything less is rooted in idolatry and needs to be repented of. Although the alien is not specifically named in this passage in Jeremiah, we know from all the other biblical texts that this is a representation of the whole group of excluded people, which does include the alien..

“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? ...your father did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? declares the Lord.”

Ezekiel enters the exile in Babylon with the people of God and faithfully proclaims both the certainty of the complete fall of Jerusalem, and afterwards, the certainty of their return. Once again the place of the alien is emphasized right along with God’s work

among the Hebrews. God never stops addressing the people of Israel as a reconciled whole. They are one people, the ethnic Hebrews and the foreigners who have entered covenant relationship. It was important to include this distinctive recognition of the alien. The words and admonitions are not uselessly redundant. They are critical because the heart of man always tends towards racism and exclusion.

- Ezekiel 22:27-29 “Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds....the people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.”

Remarkably, the great, gracious prophetic promise of the return to a land that will become so expansive it will have to be without borders (Zechariah 2:1-5), includes a special recognition of the alien. Apparently people from other nations who had also been conquered by Babylon and relocated in this great city would also see and hear of the mighty acts of God through Daniel, his three friends and the many Israelites who were learning to turn from idolatry and practice the true compassion and justice of God. Just as the “swarm of foreigners” in Egypt saw God at work in the Exodus, a new group of aliens would attach themselves to a Covenant relationship with God and his people in Babylon. How were they to be treated when the land was restored?

- Ezekiel 47:21-23 “You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites....in whatever tribe the alien settles you are to give him his inheritance, declares the Lord.”

In the period of the post-exilic Prophets, God continues to address his people in terms of their Covenant calling to be His means of salvation for all the nations of the earth, and of their responsibility to practice reconciliation with the alien.

One of the important issues addressed by Haggai and Zechariah was the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Why is the Lord concerned that the people rebuild the Temple? Because it was the location and present symbol of his presence, where all his people gathered to worship him, receive his grace and blessings and practice justice and compassion for the poor and alien (Deuteronomy 14:28,29, Isaiah 56:7). By demonstrating God’s love concretely through the tithe practices of caring for the poor and alien, the people of Israel were exhibiting God’s great salvation purpose to ultimately bring together people from all the nations of the earth - “the desired (pl) of all nations” who would love and serve him.

- Haggai 2:6 “This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

- Zechariah 7:8-10 “And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one

another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of one another.”

Seventy plus years after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi addressed the people of God about their continued unfaithfulness in light of his continued love and grace. They are not destroyed because He does not change (3:6). A core part of their disobedience lies in their refusal to tithe. Why is that so important? God says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house” 3:10. Food for whom? For the widow, the poor, the fatherless and the alien – Deuteronomy 14:28, 29. And what will the result be? “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land” Mal 3:12. The nations will see how the people of God care for all those immigrants and widows and fatherless who come to them, and they will bless God.

- Malachi 3:6-12 “I the Lord do not change, so you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.... Will a man rob God? And yet, you rob me....in tithes and offerings. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven.... Then all nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land....”

The Covenantal call to reconciliation- how the people of God treat one another from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds- how those in positions of social power treat the marginalized, is so central to the salvation purposes of God, and so central to the display of his glory among the nations that a failure to practice this kind of intentional, focused care and inclusion of the marginalized helped destroy the credibility of the Old Testament people of God as a witness to the nations and invited the discipline of the Father. But thankfully, God’s discipline is always redemptive in character. His ultimate purpose was to produce a universal kingdom made up of men, women and children from among all the nations of the earth who would be reconciled through the work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now we need to turn our attention to the fulfillment of God’s reconciliation purposes in the New Testament.

Reconciliation in the New Testament

At this point it is valuable to remember the progressive, unfolding nature of God's revelation and work among his people. The biblical story makes it clear that God teaches his people in stages the full measure of his plans and purposes. Theologians and Bible scholars have long acknowledged this pattern and talk about theology in developmental terms. What was true but only partially revealed about the "seed of the woman" in Genesis 3, and the "seed of Abraham" in Genesis 12, does not come fully to light and understanding until the birth of Christ, and even then it isn't until Paul states the relationship in such clear terms in his letters to the churches that the full light of understanding dawns (Gal 3). This is true for the doctrine of the Trinity, the work of the Holy Spirit and many, many other truths of Scripture. When we look back from the light of the New Testament we can see the seed of all these truths more clearly in the Old Testament, though in less developed form. This is also true for issues of reconciliation. Even though the Old Testament laid out demands for reconciliation, the true depth of that plan and purpose of God does not come to light until the New Testament. In the ministry of Jesus, the fullness of the plan is given birth, but it does not come of age, so to speak, until God brings it to full expression through the church in the book of Acts.

The Ministry of Jesus

While it is obvious to every believer who reads the New Testament story that Jesus came to bring salvation to the whole world and reconcile men to God, it seems it is less obvious there is an intentional focus in his ministry on reconciliation between men across racial and socio-economic lines. When we look at the Gospel narrative through the reconciliation lens, we will find a significant part of Jesus' ministry addresses this issue.

God's Old Testament call for his people to include and even give special treatment to the poor and alien was fleshed out in living color in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus announced his ministry as a fulfillment of Isaiah's promise –

Luke 4:18-21 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

If we remember the Old Testament categories of the poor and the oppressed, they included the orphan, the widow and the foreigner. As Harvey Conn points out, it seems that Jesus expands that category to include all the disenfranchised, including the morally excluded- the tax collectors and the other "sinners" (Matt 11:19).¹ **What we want to note as critical in the**

¹ Harvey Conn *The New Testament and the Poor* Lecture 1 Westminster Media

proclamation of the kingdom is that the invitation to follow Jesus is also a call to pursue reconciliation between men. As we list some of the Gospel narratives that support this conclusion it is going to be hard not to see the stories simply as a call to the universal spread of the Gospel – for individuals, without reference to being part of a reconciled community- the way we are accustomed to viewing them. The contention here is that the message of reconciliation with God has also, always been an invitation into a covenantal relationship that involved reconciliation and inclusion in the covenant community. So much so, that by the time we get to the Acts narrative, the predominantly Gentile churches are asked to provide physical relief for their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. The appeal is based on Old Testament covenantal community obligation right out of the Exodus narrative,

“At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality; as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little." 2 Cor 8:14,15.

The question, if we continue to think about Gospel proclamation without real reconciliation, is simply this: as Jesus preached good news to the poor, including foreigners, could it possibly be that he was withholding from them the “full rights of sons” (John 1:12; Gal 4:4-7) and expecting them to “make it” as individuals outside the community of God’s people? If all the benefits of the Old Testament community were extended to the foreigner who bound themselves to the Lord, like Rahab and Ruth, how much more were the love, acceptance and commitment of the community to be expressed in the fullness of salvation in the New Testament people of God?

When we read the historical record of the ministry of Christ with the Old Testament covenantal purpose of God’s commitment to the poor and the foreigner in mind, we can see reconciliation all over the Gospel narrative. **The vast majority of Jesus’ ministry was not conducted in the more Jewish, ethnocentric center of Jerusalem, but in “Galilee of the Gentiles”, a reference to the racial variety and mixture in and around the region where Jesus grew up and did most of his work. During the six centuries prior to Christ’s ministry this territory was ruled successively by Babylon, Persia, Macedonia, Egypt and Syria, while constantly experiencing infiltration and migration. The Jewish population was a minority among the dominant Gentile groups.² The extent to which Jesus did most of his ministry in this ethnically diverse community is a profound stamp on the nature of the finally inaugurated kingdom rule and reign of God. The ethnocentric power base in Jerusalem is being challenged in a significant way by the reality that the long-awaited Messiah is announcing the coming of the kingdom, and his work is not focused on Jerusalem (though she is clearly not excluded). Something new is happening. And that new, full, final expression of the promise to Abraham is being lived out among the diverse peoples of Galilee of the Gentiles.**

² *Galilee* The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible pp.344,345 Abingdon Press 1962

This is not to deny the extremely important reality that Jesus clearly came to his own Jewish people with a priority commitment to bring them the message of salvation first (Matt 10:5). But at the same time his ministry involved leading his followers into contact with Syrians (Mt 4:23) rich Romans (Mt 8), poor Samaritans (John 4) and even a Syrophenician, Greek woman (Mark 7). The point here is that Jesus not only brings personal salvation to individuals, he calls them to become a part of the reconciled community of God's people who practice justice, mercy and compassion and who also learn to call one another "family" (Luke 8:21). The rich are invited to take care of the poor (Zaccheus, Luke 19:1ff) and even the poor are urged to forsake worrying about themselves (Matt 6) and pursue God's kingdom agenda of giving to everyone who asks, including enemies (Luke 6:27ff.). The twelve disciples, though all Jewish, are a clear picture of reconciliation in process as the socio-economic and political differences between a tax collector (Matthew), a political zealot (Simon) and local fishermen (Peter, et al) would have required a whole new view of one another as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The theme of God's global salvation and call for reconciliation is woven throughout the narratives of the first three Gospels and comes to light strongly in the Gospel of John. Bible scholars and teachers have long acknowledged John's book is addressed in language and terms Greek and other Gentile readers would be able to relate to. I would suggest the book also serves as a strong polemic to Jews on the scope of God's commitment to reconciliation. There is, I freely acknowledge, a presupposition at work here in reading the Scriptures with a reconciliation point of view in mind. Part of the presupposition is that the universal offer of the Gospel without reconciliation as part of the ultimate goal and purpose of salvation seems to be, on face value, a diminished presentation of the Gospel. It allows, on a very practical level, a type of individualism that permits neglect and indifference towards other members of the Covenant family that God himself disallows in the rest of Scripture. Unless there is, in the offer of the Gospel itself, an offer of entrance into the community of God's people, with full acceptance and a commitment to love and care for one another, the door is open for an individualistic expression of Christianity that ultimately justifies the kind of ethnic and socio-economic division that men have always been tempted by and exists in so much of the church today.

On the other hand, if reconciliation truly is the central, stated, eternal purpose of God in Christ, then we should be able to read the Gospels with that purpose in mind. The more detailed theological perspectives concerning reconciliation that Paul and the other Apostle address should be built on a foundation that was clearly laid out by Jesus in his overall ministry and teaching. When Jesus told his disciples, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (Jn 16:12, 13), the reconciliation of the nations as one new man in Christ has to be at least one of the major areas of truth the Spirit would more fully reveal. Paul certainly seems to speak in these very terms when he says,

"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that

through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” Ephesians 3:4-6

With a biblical, Holy Spirit revealed reconciliation point of view in mind, we can go back and re-read the Gospel of John and look for the ways Jesus laid this groundwork for what would become the full, mature call for the New Testament church to practice reconciliation. In addition, if we look at this book through the eyes of first century Gentile and Jewish readers, the message of Christ to reconcile and include the nations in God’s salvation purposes, and thus fulfill the promises to Abraham, stand out in astounding ways. To restate the proposition and offer a brief introductory summary, **I am suggesting that John’s Gospel was not written exclusively with Gentile readers in mind and addressing Greek dualistic and early Gnostic thoughts (though it certainly has application there), but at the center of John’s Gospel there is a message of reconciliation; of acceptance of Gentiles in the Jewish covenant community; of the great fulfillment of the promises to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through the Messiah; and if we stand back and take a careful look, a very profound message that everything the Jewish community experienced in her history as the chosen vessel-people of God, was now being climactically re-lived and fulfilled through the life of Jesus- the faithful Israelite- both on behalf of the Jews and also climactically on behalf of the Gentiles through the fullness-of-salvation/reconciliation work of the Jesus the Messiah.**

When we take the forest view of John’s book we find that **every major, community defining event of the history of Israel is not only re-lived and addressed in the ministry of Jesus as described by John, but explicitly, at every single point those defining redemptive acts for Israel are offered and applied to the gentiles.** The effect is that the very things historically that make Israel the community of God’s people are –in the Messiah- given their fullest expression by being offered to the gentiles through him. The gentiles are simply and profoundly offered complete community status as part of the Covenant people of God and are to be treated, so to speak, “as one born in the land.”

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was with God in the beginning.³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe.⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.” Jn 1:1-13

This is almost like reading the Genesis / Abraham narrative all over again, only this time the focus is on the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus, the Son of God. John may be giving the Gentile reader, who may have known nothing of the Genesis account, a primer on God's saving, reconciling purposes for the nations since the beginning of creation. God, and Jesus as the second Person of the Godhead, created everything (Jn 1:1-3, Gen 1:1ff); he is the light of all men (Jn 1:4, Gen 1:27); he has been rejected as the light (Jn 1:5,10, Gen 3:1ff); but has still graciously and Sovereignly come to bring light (salvation) to all men (Jn 1:9, Gen 3:15, 12:3), and he offers the status of being children of God, not on the basis of ethnic heritage, but solely on the basis of receiving this as a gift of faith (Jn 1:12, 13; Gen 12:1-3). The whole book starts with a foundational message of reconciliation: a Jewish author telling the nations of the earth that God has set his love on all of them since the very beginning of time.

When John the Baptist introduces Jesus he is declared to be the "lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (**John 1:29**). **This is clearly a reference to the Passover lamb in Exodus 12**, whose blood was put on the doorposts so the angel of death would "pass over" the members of the Covenant community as they feasted on the lamb in a fellowship celebration of their deliverance. Now, John the Baptist says, The Passover Lamb, Jesus, has come and he is given to take away the sin of the whole world- all the ethnic groups of the earth. **The Jews and Gentiles who read this story in John's account, after some reflection and a little explanation, should have seen the implication that these new believers from the whole world were meant to be welcomed into the new community of God's people as full fledged members because they had the same "exodus/deliverance" experience as the Jews, now fulfilled in Christ.**

In chapter 2, John tells us about the first interaction Jesus had with the established Jewish, religious leaders in Jerusalem. The place is the Temple and the encounter is in the "court of the Gentiles." The Jewish leaders had perverted Temple worship and made it a source of corrupt political power. The end of the Temple-era is coming. The Messiah has come to pronounce judgment. It is not insignificant that the judgment revolves around this specific issue that the Gentiles were not welcome at the Temple. Their space was crowded out by permitting their court to be overrun by moneychangers who would assist in the buying and selling of animals for the daily offerings. **By overturning the tables and confronting the leaders, Jesus was signaling that a new day had come. This signaled the end of the Temple worship as it was known. Ultimately, his resurrected body would replace the limited symbolism of the earthly Temple (Jn 2:19). Peter and Paul would pick this theme up later, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveal the full implication of Christ's work in making Jew and Gentile the new "holy temple," united in Christ (Eph 2:19ff; 1 Pet 2:4ff).** The foundation for this full reconciliation theology and application in the life of the church is laid out here in the ministry of Jesus in John 2.

In John 3 one of the teachers of Israel, Nicodemus, comes to Christ because he is amazed at what he is seeing and hearing. **To this Jewish leader, and to the Gentile readers who are listening in, Jesus points out that God has sent him to be lifted up on a tree, just like the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness for the free healing of any who looked at it (Num 21:8,9).** The offer of free grace to Israel as she rebelled during her wanderings in the desert,

is now held out to “anyone who believes” (Jn 3:15). Then, Jesus makes one of the most amazing, clearest statements of God’s commitment to save and reconcile people from every nation and tongue in these six words, “For God so loved the world” (Jn 3:16). If we look at this through the eyes of the first Gentile readers, the breadth and inclusion of God’s invitation to salvation is simply astounding.

In chapter 4, John takes his Gentile readers to further proof of the universal message of Christ’s salvation and reveals important truths about reconciliation in worship. When Jesus meets the Samaritan woman, there are two inter-related issues he addresses. One issue relates to her personal sin and misery and her deep need for having her heart satisfied with the love of Christ. **The second issue relates to division between the Jews and Samaritans over worship. This part of the passage has often been interpreted as the woman’s attempt to “change the subject.” While that may have an element of truth in it, the time Jesus took to respond to her questions and the amazing revelation he made about God seeking worshippers who would worship in Spirit and truth, seems to suggest Jesus was dealing with something more substantial than simply her evasion of his piercing questions.**

Perhaps we can understand the issues of worship as just one more area of severe brokenness and division in the life of this woman. She was certainly a sinner. And also, certainly sinned against. She was at this well in the middle of the day, by herself, most likely because of her reputation. She was an outcast. Division was a major theme in her life. And it was not only in her personal life, but also in her religious-social life. Here was a Jew talking to her about healing and salvation, and she immediately, as it were, jumps from the area of personal brokenness to the larger area of the division between Jew and Samaritan. **If real healing is coming, it must somehow address these broader questions as well. Real quenching of her thirst would address both the close inter-personal brokenness as well as the broader social-religious brokenness. Jesus tells her the time has come when worship will no longer be defined by Jewish Jerusalem, but by worshipers *everywhere* who worship in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23, 24).** This message, at one the same time, opens the Gentile readers’ understanding to the universal, reconciling nature of the work of Christ and invites the Jewish reader to embrace reconciliation on a broad scale in worship.

After Jesus feeds the five thousand in John 5, he has a follow-up dialogue with the crowd in John 6 and uses the miracle of multiplying the bread to tell them that his ministry is one that will multiply and bring life “to the world” (Jn 6:33). The universal call is repeated when he tells them, “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life” (Jn 6:40). He makes a direct comparison with the giving of his life as bread from heaven to the manna the Jews received in the wilderness wandering. And the promise again is, “whoever eats this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:58). Reading this both from the perspective of the original Greek and Gentile readers, and in light of what we know about the whole Old Testament narrative, there is an unfolding emphasis on the message of reconciliation. For the Jewish reader, and for those who were present at the event, the reconciliation of the Gentiles as part of God’s people should have been increasingly dawning on them, because every event of the history of Israel, from the Creation narrative (Jn 1), to the promise to Abraham as a

blessing to the nations (Jn 1,3), to the Exodus Passover Lamb (Jn 2), to the Temple (Jn 2, 4), to the desert experience of the snakes (Jn 3), to the manna in the wilderness here in John 6, was being “fulfilled.” They were given the fullest, richest expression in the ministry of Christ, and there was a constant drumbeat that it was for the whole world. All the nations were being included in the Covenant family with the same type of identical, but richer experiences of redemption, lived out on their behalf by the Second Adam who was appointed as their representative (Rom 5:12ff).

In **John 7, Jesus appears at the Feast of Tabernacles** and announces himself as the source of life and satisfaction for all who thirst (Jn 7:37-39). This Feast, instituted by God at the inauguration of Israel as a nation, had a specific reconciliation message built into it. The “tabernacles” were tents the Israelites were meant to live in for seven days as they remembered their “tent” experience in the wilderness (Deut 16:13ff) and re-committed themselves to being a people who would not trust in human resources for their deliverance, but in the Lord their God. This feast followed immediately on the heels of the Feast of Weeks, a celebration of the final harvest of the year (Deut 16:9-12).

The Jews had a long tradition of recognizing the ingathering of the food harvest as a promise pointing to the ingathering of all the nations as servants of God.³ The universal offer of the Gospel, as well as the implication for reconciliation could not be more pointed than when Jesus stood **on the last and greatest day of the Tabernacle Feast and announced, “If any one is thirsty let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (Jn 7:37-38).** Why is there a reconciliation theme here? Precisely because this was the feast established at the inauguration of Israel as a nation. It was not a feast simply about individual salvation, though it clearly implies and includes that and is there in the offer when Jesus says, “if any one thirsts – let him come.” This was also a feast celebrating their collective deliverance from Egypt and establishment as the community of God’s people. The tents were a reminder of their corporate experience. The “anyones” who would respond were being invited into the community of the redeemed. What Jesus was offering was more than a personal relationship with God. It was also a place at the table with the sons of Abraham (Luke 13:28-30). No wonder the response of the Jewish leaders was to try and seize Jesus (Jn 7:30-32, 44ff.). He was completely undermining their ethnocentric control of God’s people.

The rest of the narrative of John’s Gospel is constantly interwoven with themes of God’s universal, all-ethnic embracing message of salvation. In **John 8:12 he starts a long theological discussion with the Pharisees by stating, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12) and tells them when they claim they are “Abraham’s offspring”, that the ones Jesus sets free will be “sons” who belong “to the family” forever (Jn 8:35).** In John 9 as he heals a man born blind he announces, “I am the light of the world” (Jn 9:5) and the collapse of the Jewish, ethnocentric misinterpretation of the kingdom is threatened yet again (Jn 9:22, 28-29). In John 10 Jesus describes his role as the great Shepherd of God’s people (Ezekiel 34:23) and uses some of the clearest reconciliation language to this point in the narrative, “I have other sheep that are not

³ “The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah” Alfred Edersheim Book IV Chapter VII, pp. 156ff Eerdmans 1976

of this sheep pen, I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). By the time Jesus enters Jerusalem to complete his ministry, there is such a crowd following him that the Pharisees protest to one another, “Look how the whole world has gone after him” (Jn 12:19). This could be a reference to the size of the crowd, but is more likely a reflection on the fact that a diverse group of people from many ethnic backgrounds had gathered around Jesus. The next verses tell us specifically, “there were some Greeks who went up to worship at the feast” (Jn 12:20). Finally, after four chapters of telling the disciples in multiple ways they must concretely, practically love and care for each other, both by physical demonstration in washing their feet (Jn 13) and through constant reference to the love of the Father and the Son and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in and through them (Jn 13:34-35, 14:15ff, 15:9ff), the climax of Jesus’ teaching is found in his High Priestly prayer in John 17 that “they may be brought to complete unity to let the world know that sent me and have loved them even as you loved me” (Jn 17:23).

One of the questions we need to ask ourselves as we read John’s story relates to our own cultural and theological blinders. Have we allowed a spirit of ethnocentric salvation to permeate our hearts and minds the same way the first century Jewish leaders did? Have we fallen prey to the very thing Paul warned the gentiles against in Romans 11:17-21, and become ethnically arrogant like the Jews before us? Is it really conceivable that God would direct John, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to highlight our call to reconciliation with God and one another in such a rich and consistent way, and then expect us to remain racially and socio-economically separated and distinct from one another in all the intimate expressions of the family of God in worship, prayer, the Lord’s Supper, fellowship and caring for one another’s needs? Can we remain physically segregated and still claim we are “spiritually united” and believe we have fulfilled God’s desire for unity among us, simply by remote organizational connection, or through an occasional partnering around social issues?

Reconciliation in the Doctrine of Justification

For the sake of time, I will begin this chapter by referring readers to the work entitled “Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision” by N.T. Wright⁴, the Anglican Bishop and New Testament scholar whose recent writings have stirred a great deal of productive and sometimes provocative thought in the worldwide church. There simply is not room in this paper to restate or engage in an extensive hermeneutical explanation for everything about to be said about reconciliation as a core part of the doctrine of justification. That would require a whole book- which Wright has amply supplied, and others need to expand upon. The main point I wish to seize upon is that Wright and others have made a very biblically rooted case that Paul’s discussion of justification includes a direct and inescapable contextual application to inclusion in the community of God’s people; that the doctrine of justification is not only about our personal restoration to God, but also about our restoration to one another. Paul’s contention with Peter in Galatians 2, indeed the whole force of his argument throughout the book of Galatians against those trying to persuade gentiles to be circumcised and follow special Sabbaths and feast days as a true sign of inclusion in the family (and therefore, people that Peter and Barnabus could actually eat with), was that membership in the community of God’s people- being called “sons of God” and

⁴ “Justification”, N.T. Wright IVP 2009

“Abraham’s seed” and “heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:26-29), and therefore, in fact, accepted members of the household of faith- was based on justification by faith in Christ.

Since the Reformation, and certainly in the extreme individualism of the West since then (particularly in the past 50 years), almost everything about the glorious doctrine of justification in the reformed and evangelical church has come to be viewed almost exclusively in terms of the status of acceptance this provides for the individual believer in their relationship with God. While this is undeniably glorious and incredibly liberating for the individual believer to understand the assurance of their salvation and all that it brings in the expression of the kingdom of God is based exclusively on the finished work of Christ as a gift, most wonderfully this is not all there is to this doctrine. The full truth of this doctrine is that it provides us both reconciliation to God as a gift through Christ, and reconciliation to one another. These are the two pillars of the Law- to love God and our neighbors as ourselves- and the work of Christ provides both of them to us as a gift, by faith. We are declared righteous and therefore accepted before God and granted the rights of sons, AND we are declared righteous and therefore accepted with one another and granted all the rights of being in the covenant family.

This holistic reading of the promise of salvation, and particularly the doctrine of justification, as a two-sided reconciliation –Godward/individual and manward/corporate - makes the rest of Scripture fit together so much more clearly. This is why Paul can talk about the gospel as a “righteousness from God” that is given to the individual who “does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked” (Romans 4:5) and then seamlessly make the case that this means the gentiles are equally heirs of this world with the believing Jews. (Romans 4:16-17). He has not “stepped out of” a discussion of justification at this point in the text (and in the process leave us confused about how this all applies to us as individuals) and then jumped back in again to return to his main point about our individual salvation in 4:22-24 in order to assure us that, just as Abraham was individually justified, so, we are as well. It’s all one package. He is telling us that justification means both righteousness before God for the wicked person and membership in new the community of God’s people, made up of Jew and gentile, for that same person: that is, justification provides us with a complete personal and corporate reconciliation that ultimately is expressed in the redemption of this world back to God through the work of Christ.

Perhaps the most important book to re-read and grapple with again on the connection between justification and reconciliation is the book of Galatians. The reason this is so critical is twofold. First, because this is the very first place Paul introduces this word and teaching about justification. And second, because since the days of Martin Luther and the Reformation, Galatians has been looked almost exclusively as an answer to the question: “how do I know I am individually and personally saved?” And the answer has been- “by faith in the work of Christ, and not through the keeping of the Law,” (Galatians 3:10-14). Which of course is wonderfully true; it just does not happen to be the actual, main question in Galatians. The real issue that Paul is addressing throughout the entire letter is one of practical reconciliation. It is not, “how do I know I am accepted?” but, “how do I know if others are to be accepted as true members of the community?”

Interestingly, the term “justification” isn’t used in any of Peter’s letters, or John’s for that matter. But it doesn’t have to be. The real center of our salvation is Christ Jesus himself and being found “in Christ.” Justification is part of what we get “in Christ” along with the Holy Spirit, communion with the Father, the kingdom as our inheritance and a host of other things. When Peter speaks about our faith in Christ, he speaks the same way about reconciliation as Paul does (and for that matter, James and John as well). He tells us “as you come to him, the living stone...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus

Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). The "new birth into a living hope" (1:3) that we have received in Christ binds us together with other believers as a new, living temple where we- together- offer service to God. As we "come to him" and are found in him, there is an automatic inclusion into the corporate body. Peter returns to this theme a few verses later when he says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." 1 Peter 2:9-10. Every title given to the Jews and applied to them corporately in Exodus 19:5-6 is now applied to the new gentile/Jew people of God.

While many, many believers and pastors and theologians would completely agree with the previous paragraph, it is stunning there is so little sense of practical implication for reconciliation and the need to grant each other, on a congregation/community level, the very status God Himself has given us. The only way to live in a practical denial of these truths and not embrace one another across previous tribal and socio-economic divisions is to narrow our focus so much to our individual salvation (and those who happen to be culturally like us) that we close our eyes and ears to the need to intentionally embrace one another and walk together.

Both James and John speak directly to this issue. James warns against socio-economic discrimination in particular and says,

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ² For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³ and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," ⁴ have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" James 2:1-5

John says this:

"We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments." 1 John 4:19-5:2

These passages need to be read in light of the reality of New Testament church life; congregations where former enemies, both Jew and gentile and slave and free, were being brought into binding covenant relationship with one another and who now had the privilege and obligation to carry out God's commands to carry each other's burdens, take care of each other's physical needs and embrace one another as equal family members in the household of God. This is the doctrine of justification (without the term being used) spelled out in the

plainest language possible. Much of the evangelical and reformed church of the 21st Century stands guilty of the kind of lying John warns against (which is simply another way of stating Paul's accusation against Peter of denying the truth of the Gospel). There are far too many corporate confessions of sin at a variety of church gatherings that take place in a context of racial exclusion which never come near the truth of how great the sin of segregation and racism in the church really is. There have been hundreds and thousands of calls for a spiritual renewal and spiritual re-awakening in the church with absolutely no acknowledgment that part of the core change that needs to take place is not simply some slightly newer or deeper understanding of the atonement or the love of Christ or the power of the Holy Spirit on a personal level, but instead, a deepened awakening and understanding of how all of those things enable us to be reconciled and deeply love our brothers and sisters across the current racial and economic divisions. May we have another reformation and re-discover justification by faith, but now in all its dimensions, including the restoration and reconciliation to one another that God himself reveals to us as our standing and calling in this great doctrine.