

**Sermon Seminar**  
**May 21-23, 2012**  
**Dr. Jim Reynolds**

Book: Jim Reynolds, *The Unfinished Drama of Scripture* (Living in the True Story of the World)

The unfinished six act drama of scripture - Creation, Descent, Israel, Jesus, Pentecost-New Community, New Heaven and New Earth.

This is one great Story dominated by Creation-New Creation.

Creation and New Creation are inextricably connected in scripture. See Genesis 1, 2-Revelation 21-22.

The call, promise and faith of Abraham in Genesis 12 are inextricably connected to salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ in Romans 4.

The Story the Bible tells, the redemption of the entire creation, is missional. Creation and Fall-then Israel-Jesus-The Church as God's redemptive agents for a world God loves, all anticipating the mighty act of God to bring his kingdom to earth.

N.T. Wright, *How God Became King*

1. Jesus' Story Is The Story Of The Climax Of Israel's Story
2. Jesus' Story Is The Story Of The Lord God Coming Back To His People
3. Jesus' Story Is The Story Of The Renewal Of The People Of God
4. Jesus' Story Is The Story Of The Clash With The Kingdoms Of Caesar And This World
5. Jesus' Story Is The Story Of Kingdom And Cross Together

Thomas Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Torrance sets the Revelation and Mediation of Christ within the Story of Israel.)

1. The covenant partnership between the Lord God and Israel involved a running conflict between God and what Paul called "the carnal mind."
2. The election of Israel by the Lord God took the form of the creation of a community of reciprocity. God's action-man's worship and the doing of justice.
3. The Lord God's Revelation to Israel came to Israel in such a way as to intersect and integrate its spiritual and physical reality. Idols and social injustice are condemned by a Holy God.
4. The Lord God's Revelation of himself through the medium of Israel has provided mankind with permanent structures of thought and speech about him. Priests, day of atonement, sacrifice, sin, Lord, community, etc.

## CHAPTER 18: ACT 4 -- JESUS

Jesus is born at what Charles Dickens would have called the “worst of times,” during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Yet the Gospel writers are not concerned with Caesar’s reign or Herod’s reign. They are singular in their announcement of God’s rule in Jesus as the completion of the purposes of God for the entire world.

### JESUS’ PLACE IN THE BIG STORY

Matthew begins his gospel with a seventeen-verse genealogy of Jesus. Genealogy is not about information; it is about Story. Matthew is telling Jesus’ Story, but in doing so he puts Jesus in a much bigger Story. He traces Jesus back to Abraham. In verse 17 Matthew says, “Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.”

Matthew has used the double of seven, the perfect number, three times. Matthew is emphatically declaring that Jesus completes and brings to its final intended purposes the work of the Lord on this earth.

In the very first verses of his Gospel, Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah and identifies John the Baptist as the prophet who will prepare the world for Jesus, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. Luke traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Adam through David and Abraham. Jesus is the new Adam and the true king of Israel. John begins his Gospel with, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This Word has become flesh, John says, and dwelt among us. John is going back to eternity, to creation, and to the early days of Israel to tell his readers who Jesus is.

In every instance the Story the Gospels tell completes the Story told in the Hebrew Bible in an all-inclusive manner.

The Old Testament does not intend that we should see Israel’s hiStory as an end in itself or for the sake of Israel alone, but for the sake of the rest of humanity. Just as the New Testament withholds our introduction to Jesus until we have been reminded of what went before, so the Old Testament had brought Israel on stage in Genesis 12 only after an extensive introduction to the dilemma of the whole human race.

Just as Genesis 1-11 is entirely occupied with humanity as a whole -- the world of all nations with the apparently insoluble problem of their corporate evil -- so the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, after calling Israel to repentance, turn toward the world. Genesis 1-11 describes and calls the disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom rule of God to the nations.

The continuity between the vision of Genesis and that of the Gospels is organic and enlarging. The faithfulness and patience of God is staggering when the True Story is told. Only the faithfulness of the Lord God can move us from the curse of the descent through the coming of Jesus to the blessings of the new heaven and new earth. But it is always one Story in one Bible.

## THE EUCATASTROPHE

Act IV is the fullness of God on stage. It is what John Donne called, “immensity cloistered in a womb.” Just when we thought the Lord God would sue for divorce, after 1,500 years of our adulteries, the Lord God sends Jesus. In a world of no-fault divorce, this is astonishing grace. It was the most dramatic of moments. Angels gasped! This is what Tolkien calls the eucatastrophe, the astounding and unforeseen good happening that rescues billions of people! It is the polar opposite of a catastrophe.

The Lord God -- the Lord of Exodus 34 and the servant of Isaiah 53 -- becomes the true Israelite; the baby boy of an unmarried teenager in Bethlehem. It was scandalous then and still is!

The Old Testament anticipated a Messiah, but Jesus exceeded all prophecies and transformed all hopes. This was the “steadfast love of the Lord,” the never-giving-up love of the Lord, pouring himself out through Jesus. This was the Lord God of Exodus 34, compassionate for a thousand generations, in a teenager’s womb!

The Lord God who could not be looked upon has come near to us and is visible in the person of Jesus. Jesus, who seven times in the Gospel of John refers to himself as the “I Am,” puts the true face on the “I Am” God of the burning bush. We saw his face and we lived. In fact to know him is to live, according to John. The face we see on Jesus is a face we have seen nowhere else. Jesus is startlingly unique. His face is the face of God!

This is the same God who comes near at the burning bush, nearer at Sinai, the Tabernacle, the Temple and the prophets, and then absolutely the nearest and dearest in Immanuel -- God with us! This was God in the flesh, but we did not immediately know it to be the case. The revelation of his identity was filtered through the crucible of miracle, parables, foot washing, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. Finally after his resurrection, we declared him “my Lord and my God.” Jesus grew on us!

The humility of the scene at Bethlehem and the quiet childhood in Nazareth intrigued us. We have always wanted to know more about him.

The Incarnation is not to be confused with the Hindu concept of an Avatar, which is a theophany, or a visual appearance of a deity to human beings. In Hinduism, avatars abound. But avatars are not the one living God becoming a man! In the incarnation, he who is the source of and sustainer of our humanity has entered once and for all into our historical experience to take that humanity forever into his eternal life. The resurrection of Jesus was not a casting off of the human and a resumption of the divine nature. Jesus is forever God with us!

The human is the manifestation of and the vehicle of the divine both in the earthly life of Jesus and in his glorified humanity. The incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection-ascension of Jesus Christ decisively changed the relationship between God and humankind forever!

Not only has the mystery of the infinite, discernible in the varieties of human experience in all cultures, now come to be known personally and concretely in terms of a concrete human life, but the humanity of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ has become the heart of our

union and fellowship with God forever. The risen Christ remains in heaven the human face of God.

### **WE KNOW WHY HE DIED BUT DO WE KNOW WHY HE LIVED?**

At about age 30, Jesus appeared with his cousin John at the Jordan River. John who preached, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” also baptized Jesus in the dirty Jordan River. At his baptism Jesus identifies with us in our humiliating destitution before God. A voice declares him to be “My beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” When Jesus humiliates himself by entering into water baptism in the muddy Jordan River, the Spirit comes on him, confirming his way of humiliation rather than the way of Herodian power.

The Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Satan tempts us to destroy us. God uses the same events to test us so as to strengthen us for the mission. Jesus, when tempted, cites Deuteronomy three times in opposition to Satan. Deuteronomy contains the gospel according to the Pentateuch, the most respected words in all of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus places himself in the great Story Deuteronomy tells.

Satan seeks to move Jesus away from the Way of Humiliation which he embraced at his baptism. Satan fails and Jesus goes forward with the most remarkable season of human life in the hiStory of the world. This is possible because from the hour of his baptism Jesus lives in the power of the Spirit.

### **THE PRESENCE IS BACK!**

Jesus enjoys the presence of God and baptizes us in the presence. It was the end of the exile from the presence. It had been 600 years since the presence had been in the temple. It had been 400 years since a prophet had been full of the prophetic spirit. It had been 600 hundred years since Ezekiel spoke of the spirit making Israel’s bleached bones live and more than 400 years since Joel talked of a time when the spirit would be “poured out on all flesh.”

All of this was to happen in the age of the Messiah. John the Baptist says he “baptizes in water but one is coming who will “baptize [immerse, drench] you” in the presence of God. The exile is over! The age of the Messianic Kingdom has begun!

Israel had been operating without the fullness of God’s presence among and within her. Jesus brings to an end this exile from the presence. At the end of his life he announces his imminent departure, but very pointedly declares that he is not leaving his disciples as orphans. He is giving them the presence, the great paraclete, the comforter, who will give them life and guidance, and who will convict the world of her sin.

## **THE NEW THING -- THE KINGDOM IS HERE AND NOW**

The two testaments are organically linked to each other. The relationship between them is neither of ultimate development nor of contrast but of beginning and completion, of promise and fulfillment. And the bond that brings them together is the dynamic concept of the rule of God. There is a “new thing” in the New Testament, and it lies precisely here.

The Old Testament is illumined with the hope of the coming kingdom, and that same kingdom lies at the heart of the New Testament as well. To the Old Testament, the victory of God’s kingdom is always a future thing and must always be spoken of in the future tense: “Behold the days are coming.”

This point separates Jesus’ kingdom proclamation from the Judaism of his day. In Judaism, God’s sovereign rule and universal kingdom constitutes an eternal fact: “His kingdom endures forever.” His kingdom is “there” as a factual reality, waiting for human beings to submit to his dominion. The kingdom “comes” through human acknowledgment of God’s rule. But his kingdom will also come in the future, as an end-time event. Then God will act in power and will cause his rule to appear throughout the earth. In the present, God’s rule waits on human decision; in the future, God will act sovereignly in power to bring about his rule.

### **THE KINGDOM IS HERE**

In the New Testament we encounter a change. The tense is a resounding present indicative. The Kingdom is here! And this is indeed a very new thing: it is, in fact, Good News, the Good News that God has acted to establish his rule. Jesus preached one sermon and made one stunning announcement over and over: “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel.” What all the ages had desired to see is now here in this Jesus! If I, by the finger of God, cast out demons, then “The Kingdom of God has come among you” (Luke 11:20).

Whereas the Jews had seen this age and the age to come as two very distinctive and successive ages, now Jesus is declaring the overlapping of the ages. The emphasis is on the *now* of the age to come, though the *not yet* promises to bring the Lord to this earth in victorious consummate glory.

Jesus is a kingdom-bringer. He sees his kingdom coming to earth. In Matthew 19:28 he says, “I tell you the truth at the restoration of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne you who have followed me shall sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel.” This vision comes out of the first testament (Isaiah 65). It is a part of the new creation. The outreach of the twelve in the Gospels extends to Israel. This vision enlarges after Pentecost to include the nations. The vision is always one of his disciples administering the Kingdom under the authority of the Christ.

## **ONE GOSPEL SERMON**

Jesus' one great proclamation, "The Kingdom of God has come near; turn and trust God," the message of God's gracious invasion in a world of evil, consummates the dominant Storyline of the Great Story. In Jesus, the purposes of God are proclaimed and embodied in unparalleled ways that reveal the true character of God as nothing has in all of world hiStory! The heart of what we call the Lord's Prayer pleads for God to "bring your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven." This is our foundational proclamation and prayer until he comes!

We proclaim and believe this good news in a world where evil persists, but where the kingdom rule of God has come and is not leaving!

## **A KINGDOM OF GOD MOVEMENT**

The Kingdom of God is not a spiritual experience movement but a Jewish-style movement designed to establish the rule of God in the world.

The Kingdom of God in the Gospels is a counter-temple movement. Jesus as the new temple subverts the importance of the physical temple.

The confession "Jesus is Lord" is a counter-empire movement. Jesus is Lord, and Herod and Caesar are not!

The Kingdom of God meant Israel had returned from exile. It meant the presence is back in Israel, baptizing her, and the Lord is returning to judge and to save.

Yet the kingdom did not come in consuming power. The kingdom comes, but it has not yet fully come. Therefore, because of this first partial fulfillment of God's promises and the outpouring of His Spirit, the final "kingdom coming to this world as it is in heaven" is expected and prayed for every day!

## **THE OVERLAP OF THE AGES**

Since Jesus, we live in the overlap of the ages! The kingdom has come in right on top of the age of death and it has not departed! We now live in anticipation of the kingdom destroying all death, sin, and Satan. The kingdom is inaugurated and advancing in this world. Yet the kingdom has not come in consuming power, utterly destroying sin, death and Satan. Therefore, the Gospels contain several kingdom parables that anticipate the final coming of the Son of Man in glory to this world (Matthew 24:30-31, 25:31-46, Mark 13:26-27, and Luke 21:27-28).

Since Jesus, we now live in the last days and expect their consummation! We expect a time, a real time, when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven! It is not by accident that more than half of his parables were kingdom parables, declaring his present and coming rule!

## **KINGDOM STORIES**

Jesus tells strange stories. We call them parables. Most of them are designed to declare the very character of the kingdom that Jesus brings to this world. Parables are stories that subversives use, people who seek to overthrow the existing order. Parables are not designed for everybody, but for those who are also in on the overthrow of the existing order. Matthew 13 contains parable after parable of the kingdom. Parables are explained to those who want to know, but never explained to those who do not inquire.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God, the Inaugurator of the Kingdom of God, but he refuses to be manipulated by the crowds and by the popular longing for a violent overthrow of the Roman occupation. So he does not shout, "I am the Messiah." Rather he goes about announcing the kingdom in his own way; speaking in parables, hanging out with sinners, washing feet, casting out demons, touching and healing lepers.

## **JESUS AND SATAN**

Jesus cast out demons, declared that he was defeating Satan, and said that such acts of deliverance were signs of the kingdom coming to the world. He came to destroy the power of Satan and ultimately to cast Satan into the lake of fire. He did, and he will! During Jesus' ministry, Satan fell like lightning. Jesus describes Satan as bound (Matthew 12:22-37). The spirit of God in Jesus and his disciples routinely defeats Satan and portends that the victory of God over evil has dramatically come to this world in great power.

## **THE SICK AND JESUS**

Jesus heals the sick as a way of manifesting the kingdom and gathering the people around himself. The sick belong in the kingdom. They are not unclean just because they are sick. Healing is forever a powerful sign of the in-breaking of the kingdom in a world of death. He not only heals lepers, he touches them before healing them. Their uncleanness under the law does not deter him from invading their shameful, diseased ridden bodies and healing their lives! He went out after these people.

Jesus' healing of the sick contrasts dramatically with the Essenes, who excluded the blind, the lame, the deaf, and the dumb from inclusion in the community of God's restored people. Jesus not only healed the sick, he called them to turn to God and away from sin.

## **JUDGMENT ON THE TEMPLE**

To add to the provocation of his entire ministry, he performed a symbolic act of divine judgment in the temple precincts, following it up with a message of impending doom on Jerusalem (Mark 11:12-19, 13:1-2). In his judgment on the temple, he is affirming his authority

as king over the temple as the one prophesying its destruction and the one raising it up in three days.

### **OTHER-DIRECTED LIFESTYLE, SELF-DIRECTED CLAIMS**

Jesus combined what has been called an other-oriented lifestyle with self-directed claims. This means that Jesus was like Buddha in living a life for others, but Buddha never claimed to be the Son of God. In Adolph Hitler, Julius Caesar, Idi Amin and Pol Pot we find the self-directed claims to be divine or at least divinely inspired above all other mortals, but in these instances the lifestyle was not other-directed but full of self-glorification and violence. Only in Jesus is there one who seemingly makes the most arrogant claims about himself but who also lives the most humble and selfless life, leading to a voluntary death on a cross! Such is the mystery of Jesus.

### **CHAPTER 19: CALLING DISCIPLES -- FOLLOW ME**

Jesus called his hearers to follow him in advancing the kingdom. He called them to leave all and to give up their lives for the sake of his cross. Jesus was out to change the world through redeemed, Spirit-filled witnesses. Jesus was looking to pull his disciples into the Story -- body, mind, and heart.

Like a play in search of actors, this is the call to discipleship. The kingdom is on. Will anybody join the revolution? Jesus was more than gracious to his hearers, but was never compromising or accommodating. He once said, "If you want to be perfect [complete or whole] then go sell all you have and give it to the poor." These words are breathtaking, but they give new life. He was telling the truth when he said, "Come follow me and I will give you rest." But it was also true as the German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." So it was and so it is today.

### **RECONSTITUTING THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

Jesus is the center of the new community. He is the center as the "I Am" was at Sinai. For he is the "I Am" of Sinai in human form. When he said "I Am" the light, the way, the door, the truth, the bread, the resurrection and the life, discerning hearers knew that the Story Moses told of the burning bush and Sinai was advancing in astonishing ways in the person of Jesus, who calls us to him and to love one another as "I have loved you."

Jesus calls twelve to be his apostolic band. Twelve symbolizes his reconstitution of the people of God, the Israel of God, around himself. As one with greater authority than Moses, Jesus calls the twelve to be apostles, ones sent with authority. The reign of God did not found nor establish a people of God, but rather gathered and reconstituted the people of God, the true children of Abraham.

## **CHILDREN -- THE NOBODIES -- AND JESUS**

Jesus said we must be like children, who live without any social status, the ultimate nobodies, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. The way into the kingdom and the people of God is the way of the child, the way of the desperate who cry out, "God be merciful to me a nobody."

## **DISCIPLLED WOMEN**

When Jesus began announcing the kingdom, women were considered no more than highly valued property in Israel and judged as "misbegotten males" by Aristotle, the most influential philosopher of the day. By contrast, when Jesus the King calls women to follow him, the restoration of the original Genesis vision of two equal and divine image-bearers, male and female, is embodied on this earth. No other rabbi of the day ever called a woman to be his disciple.

Through his redeeming life, death, and resurrection, Jesus redeemed men and women from the bondage of sin and the oppressive consequences of sin in the world. Women are restored to their created roles as divine image-bearers, complementary to the male; the two together making humankind. This made it possible for Paul to later say, "There is neither male or female; you are all one in Christ."

## **LIFE IN THE KINGDOM**

The teachings of Jesus, gathered in Matthew 5-7 as the Sermon On The Mount, come only after Jesus has been declared in the genealogy to be the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, after Jesus has received the spirit of God at his baptism, after Jesus is declared to be Immanuel, after Jesus comes "teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease," and after he has said to Simon and his brother Andrew as well as James and John, the sons of Zebedee, "come follow me." Only then is it time to teach the Jesus way of being the people of God to the people of God.

Jesus believed the time for God's kingdom to dawn had come. With it, a new agenda had emerged which was diametrically opposed to the agenda that had taken over the symbols of Jewish national identity and which was committing all manner of injustices. The kingdom coming is one revolution, but the agenda Jesus proposes constitutes another revolution in the way Jesus' disciples will live as the people of God.

Against this background of the double revolution, Jesus announces the kingdom agenda in the Sermon On The Mount (Matthew 5-7). Here Jesus teaches a new way of being the people of God. His commandment to love your enemies signals a drastic change -- a revolution of love for the enemy. This commandment alone sets Jesus apart from all the Messianic pretenders and rabbis of his day.

## **FILLING FULL THE STORY'S PROMISES**

Jesus declares that he did not destroy the Torah and the prophets but fulfilled them. He filled full the expectancy in Israel's prophets and the law. He is living out of the expectancy, the pregnancy of the past waiting to be birthed like an overdue child in her mother's womb! He completed all of the first testament, like a good adulthood completes a good childhood.

There is continuity in the childhood going onto adulthood, but there is also discontinuity. Childish things are left in the past and surprising maturations never anticipated in childhood explode onto the stage of the adult life. Yet the DNA of the childhood is in the adulthood.

### **ONE GREATER THAN MOSES -- UNPRECEDENTED AUTHORITY**

When Jesus refers to Moses and says, "You have heard that it was said," then adds, "but I tell you," he is making an unprecedented declaration of authority. It is an age-changing moment. The age of the Lord Jesus Christ is breaking in on the world and the age of Moses is passing away. It is difficult to imagine a teaching that could be any more dramatic (Matthew 5:21-48). Jesus, even in his teaching, is clearly more than a rabbi. Rabbis repeat and teach Moses. Not Jesus.

He calls his disciples to more, not less than before -- to stop evil sexual desire, not just adultery; to stop hating, not just killing; and to stop returning evil for evil. He taught us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies. This is all part of the new way of life in the kingdom Jesus brings. Jesus is the peace. The violence is over!

Up until Jesus' time, the model of a man was Alexander The Great. Alexander was bloodthirsty, ambitious without bounds and evangelistic for the Greek way of thinking and culture-building. Jesus, by contrast, revolutionized the vision of masculinity and true humanity. Jesus redefined king as servant, as one who loves his enemies, and who does not spill our blood but who pours out his blood for us. Jesus said the way up is down. Jesus turned Alexander on his head. Jesus carried more authority on his shoulders when he marched from Galilee to Jerusalem and onto the cross than Alexander did as he marched into country after country, slaughtering those who opposed him and subjugating them to the Greek way.

Jesus in no way excluded the Gentiles from salvation, but he himself directed his attention exclusively to Israel. The fascination toward the restored and empowered people of God under the reign of God would draw the nations to the Lord (Isaiah 2:2-3 and 60:1-3). Therefore when Jesus speaks of his followers being the "light on the hill," he is envisioning the nations' pilgrimage to the Lord. He is declaring that when Israel is really Israel then the nations will stream to Zion. Jesus in the Sermon On The Mount is discipling his followers into becoming the new Israel -- the city set on a hill.

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## **THE UNIQUE MOMENT IN THE GREAT STORY**

The Story the commands live within determine everything about the commands. But it is also true that the moment in the Story shapes decisively the life we now live as followers of Jesus. Jesus comes inaugurating the Kingdom of God. The fourth act, a new time in the hiStory of redemption, is coming into the world. The Story is advancing. The first three acts of the Story remain foundational, but the new act -- Jesus and the Kingdom -- transforms the Story in unimaginable ways. Those who seek to follow Jesus, to enter into the Story are called to different behavior.

Our ethics are not only connected to the Story we live by; the shape of our obedience is formed by the unique moment in the Story. This continues to be true as the Kingdom of God breaks into the world in the person of Jesus. For example, the food laws become obsolete (Mark 7:1-23), and divorce is condemned (Mark 10) and sexual double standards are obliterated (Matthew 5:27-30, Matthew 19:1-13).

These are the consequences of a new act in the drama of creation-redemption. As redemption moves into a new era, the God-shaped life changes to conform more completely to the fuller revelation of God's will and the coming into the world of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Story we find ourselves in and the moment we are living in the Story make a huge difference in how we interpret what is going on in our lives and what we think is right or wrong.

## **JESUS, THE GENESIS NARRATIVE AND MARRIAGE**

In Matthew 19:1-15 Jesus responded to the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" This question is asked after the kingdom is announced, inaugurated, and demonstrated by mighty works, and after women had been called to follow Jesus. Jesus does not answer the question by invoking the authority of Deuteronomy 24, which accommodated men's hard hearts, but rather leaps over that legal text to invoke the Genesis 1-2 text, which is the word of God for the kingdom.

Jesus refuses to accommodate hard hearts because he is rescuing hearts from sin's hardness and giving men and women the spirit. Jesus sees the kingdom vision to be at least comparable to the Eden vision. It reflects the divine intention, not the divine accommodation. These words disturbed those who were preoccupied with how to get out of a marriage. They still do.

The kingdom coming and the call of women to be fully equal children of God in the kingdom makes the Deuteronomy passage from Act III of the Story obsolete. It was the word of God at one point in the Story, but it is no longer the word of God in the fourth act -- the time of Jesus.

Jesus sees the Genesis 1 and 2 narrative as normative because it reflects the will of God before sin ravaged our minds and hearts. Therefore, the Genesis Story of creation is the word of God for those who follow Jesus. Jesus puts his hearers into the Story of creation and new

creation in his name. Jesus, in Matthew 19, is rendering obsolete in this time of kingdom fullness Moses' commandments, which served their purpose for a season. Jesus is restoring us to our original status and more. Jesus sees the first act of the Story, creation, as casting a moral vision lost to the world. He is reconnecting us to our good and noble roots.

This gives perspective to Jesus' earlier prohibition against lust. Evil desire that "takes the fig leaf off the genitals and puts it over the eyes" removes the personal dimension of longing between two divine image-bearers who care for one another with godly affection and powerful longing. Lust is not bad because sex is dirty, but because sexuality is so good. Jesus' respect for the Genesis text tells us Jesus is not embarrassed by the nudity of the creation but by the leering, loveless, dirty eyes of the world.

### **OUR DIVORCES AND THE TRUE STORY**

The teaching of Jesus regarding the sanctity of marriage is never undone by our divorces. Even where divorce is a necessary action for a disciple, disciples will always see divorce as coming far short of the ideal that God intends for a man and a woman united in marriage.

Hence divorce is a tragedy. It does not fit the biblical Story of how our lives are meant to be lived with one another and before God. But this point of view differs sharply with that held by many people in our culture. Because of the individualism and consumerism central to the Western cultural Story, divorce is often portrayed as something positive; not a tragedy, but a courageous step toward personal growth. Now we even have divorce parties. To the extent that such ideas live in the church, the church is not being faithful to the Storyline as uniquely shaped by Jesus.

### **THE BIG NET**

Jesus sought to gather an Israel fractured by struggling parties and groups; and so he went to tax collectors and zealots, to the rich and the poor, to the rural population of Galilee and the city of Jerusalem. He told his disciples to cast out big nets to gather all who will come: the sick and the dying, the scribes and the tax collectors, the unclean and the Pharisees, men and women. The reach went in every conceivable direction.

Isaiah 35:5-6 envisioned the blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame leaping and the dumb singing as integral to the regathering of Israel.

This agenda revealed who God is, yet it also elicited tremendous opposition from the Pharisees and Sadducees. Jesus appeared to be disrespectful of the honor/shame religious culture their traditions had created. Jesus brought a sin/redemption culture back to the world. He seemed to be compromising by going to unclean houses and enjoying parties with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and outcasts. He was not compromising, however. He was advancing the kingdom!

## **THE PRODIGAL SON -- THE GOD WHO LOVES SINNERS**

Jesus tells his most famous parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, to answer the charges that he “ate with sinners” and to cast a kingdom vision (Luke 15). His description of the elder brother, when contrasted with the wildly celebrative father, has convicted more self-righteous Christians of our hatefulness than any other Story on the planet. Rembrandt’s painting of the scene in all its fatherly tenderness and brotherly judgment is one of the most famous paintings in the world.

## **THE AGGRESSIVE HOSPITALITY OF GOD**

Jesus goes after the lost, the least, and the left out. He offers the hospitality of God to all who will come. He puts his arms around the shamed: the outcasts, sinners and marginalized individuals. Jesus’ aggressive going after the “sinners” distinguishes him from all other rabbis. Rabbis did not go out after the unclean. They taught only the good people.

Jesus includes among his disciples those who stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum: Zealots (Simon, Judas) and a tax collector hated for his collusion with Roman authorities (Matthew). Jesus welcomes at least three groups of people who are usually shunned: those marginalized for physical defects (blind, lame, lepers), traitors to and exploiters of Israel (tax collectors), and political enemies (Samaritans, Romans).

Jesus’ practice of hospitality toward sinners was without precedent in Israel. He shared in table fellowship with those shut out of the religious community. His habit of associating with the misfits of Palestinian society drew hostile criticism from religious authorities. Jewish scholar Geza Vermes says this aspect of Jesus’ lifestyle, more than any other, distinguished him from “both his contemporaries and even his prophetic predecessors.”

The prophets spoke on behalf of the honest poor, and defended the widows and the fatherless, and the oppressed and those exploited by the wicked, the rich and the powerful. Jesus went further. In addition to proclaiming these blessed he actually took his stand among the pariahs of the world, those despised by the respectable. Sinners were his table companions and the ostracized tax collectors his friends.

What the Pharisees -- an influential school of Judaism -- saw as sinful disregard of covenant ideals, Jesus saw as the birth of a new covenant, the visible expression of God’s liberating reign. At the table fellowship with sinners and outcasts, to which they were invited unconditionally, Jesus was enacting a parable, a foretaste of the coming Messianic banquet when many will come from the east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11, Luke 13: 29).

Jesus is aggressively going out after sinners, outcasts and the reviled people of the land. His ministry is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the throngs who had forgotten their spiritual

addresses, the sick who desperately needed a physician but were being shamed by Jewish institutions, and the sinners who saw no way to atone for their tragic sins.

### **FIRST THE PARTY, THEN REPENTANCE**

It's important to note that Jesus is not enabling sinners to remain unchanged. He invites himself to the home of the notorious Zacchaeus. He is announcing the kingdom presence of God as he goes into his home, extending the hospitality of God even as he is being hospitably received. He communicates the joy of the kingdom presence. His presence and his words "turn and believe the Good News" move Zacchaeus to repent of his wrongdoing and declare his intention to "restore fourfold" those he has ripped off! So, first the kingdom party -- the hospitable love of God for sinners -- and then the repentance. The "sinners" received repentance because they knew that God loved them and the kingdom rule of God would include them! Now, possibly for the first time, they knew there was One to whom they could turn.

### **JUDGMENT AND GRACE -- IN THAT ORDER**

The Story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery and dragged to Jesus appears in John 7:53-8:11. The Pharisees told Jesus that the law would put her to death, and then asked, "What do you say?" This Story was recently read by Habiba, a young Muslim woman in Cairo, who attended the University of Cairo and explored Marxism but was frustrated with all of her options. She longed for a God who would be her Daddy. As she read the Gospel of John she was thrilled with the description of Jesus as the Word of God on the earth. Then she came to the Story of the woman caught in the act of adultery; a Story she had never read before. She cringed at Jesus' options.

It seemed he had to either approve the woman's destruction or approve her behavior. The first alternative reflected Islam; the second, that of the "Christian" West. To her shock and amazement Jesus did not choose either alternative. Rather he refused to condemn her, but told her to go her way and "sin no more." Jesus did not embrace the harsh Islamic punishment alternative or the immoral alternative of the "Christian" West. He spoke judgment and grace, neither condemning nor excusing. At that very moment Habiba knew she must follow Jesus. She immediately went out to find a pastor to tell her more. She became a follower of Jesus and is now a missionary in Lebanon.

This is one of many stories that offer Jesus' distinctive vision of all things. Nobody has ever taught and lived the judgment and grace of God in such creative, life-giving ways as Jesus.

### **JESUS' MISSION TO ISRAEL -- THE FRESH RETELLING**

Jesus is announcing the rule of God to all of Israel. Not just to those in good standing with the Herodians, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the compromisers, or the zealots. He is discipling Israel as she had not ever been disciplined. Israel was to have been a "light to the

nations,” but ever since the calamitous Book of Judges she has never walked in sustained faithfulness to the Lord God nor has she blessed the nations. The nation destined to be God’s harbinger of “light to the nations” has fallen into the dark ages. And so the vitality of the kingdom rule of God is offered to Israel. She is called to repent, so as to be restored to her mission of light-bringer to the nations.

It is instructive that since the time of Joshua, who bore the same name as Jesus, only a few kings (notably David) renounced idolatry and lived within a covenant relationship with the Lord God. And so it is that Jesus disciplines Israel into the covenant purposes, power, and rule of God. It is remarkable that such an old Story would be dusted off and declared true again. Not only that, it is remarkable that after the passage of centuries and the silence of God, Jesus comes in such fresh anointing and declaring he is “fulfilling the law and the prophets.”

### **FORGIVENESS -- GOD’S WORK**

Jewish tradition did not invest the Messiah with the right of forgiveness of sins. The Messiah, according to Jewish self-understanding, would exterminate the godless in Israel, crush demonic power, and protect his people from the rule of sin, but the forgiveness of sin was never attributed to him. Jesus did not speak as a priestly or prophetic agent assuring God’s forgiveness on the day of final judgment, nor did he offer a provisional pardon later to be ratified by a higher court. He forgave sins on the spot -- boldly, freely, and without appeal to any authority beyond himself.

In declaring to people the forgiveness of sins, Jesus bypassed the temple with its divinely instituted priesthood and sacrificial system. Because the temple represented the very identity of Israel as a nation, this revolutionary disregard marked an unprecedented authority. Jesus is clearly acting as if he is God in the flesh.

Jesus’ calming of the storms on the sea is another work only God does. Jesus acts as the creator God, Lord of creation, when he calms the storms and walks on water.

### **CHAPTER 20: JESUS’ CRUCIFORM IDENTITY**

Midway through the Gospel of Mark, Jesus begins declaring his intention “to give his life as a ransom for many” and says the Son of Man will die in Jerusalem. So Jesus, in the lineage of King David, the lion of the tribe of Judah, is also the suffering servant, “wounded for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53). But this identity also includes the son of man imagery of the true human being who is exalted to the right hand of the ancient of days (Daniel 7).

The longing for a Messianic deliverer in Israel made it impossible for Jesus to publicly declare his identity. Had Jesus declared openly that he was the Messiah, he almost certainly would have precipitated hysteria and even violent efforts to make him the leader of an armed revolt! Yet when asked privately, he acknowledged his identity but immediately qualified their vision of his kingship by declaring “The Son of Man must die in Jerusalem.”

He used the phrase “Son of Man” because this title made an exalted claim and yet Jesus is able to fill it with his own meaning by coupling it with suffering servant. He was first to suffer and die as the suffering servant and then he would come in glory as the Son of Man.

But Jesus is also the incarnate Son of God, becoming like us in every respect yet without sin. He is the Lord God of Exodus 34, faithful to a thousand generations; the one who agonizes over his rebellious children, becomes a man, and now declares his intention to personally redeem his own!

Jesus comes into a Story that has exhausted itself. There is no other ways to bring the curtain up. So the unspeakable becomes the central message of the Story; God is crucified! The Lord God becomes the redeemer God in his own flesh on the cross.

This announcement of a ransoming death by crucifixion is met with opposition and bewilderment among even his own disciples. No one in Israel expects the Messiah to be crucified and raised from the dead.

In three of the Gospels, almost immediately after Jesus declares his intention as Messiah to die in Jerusalem, he is strengthened in his cruciform identity by the glory of the Lord enveloping him on the Mount of Transfiguration (See Mark 8-9, Matthew 16-17 and Luke 9). At the humiliation of his water baptism and at the announcement of his death on the cross, the Father comes to the Son to reaffirm, “You are my beloved son. In you I am well pleased.”

He was Israel’s Messiah, but as Isaiah 53 envisioned it. Jesus preaches the message of revolution – that there should be no king but God, but he is a double revolutionary. He is ushering in the kingdom rule of God but he must die to redeem Israel and the whole world from a terrible, overpowering bondage to idols, rebellion, guilt, addictions, and death. Jesus is a servant-king, a redeemer-king who dies for his loved ones and a Lord who says “the least is the greatest.”

## **SAMARITANS AND CENTURIONS -- HINTS OF SOMETHING BIG**

Jesus reached beyond Israel even as he primarily went to Israel. He goes out of his way to engage the Samaritan woman and he commended the faith of a Roman centurion. The heart of Jesus is for the nations. All of this explodes into reality when he commissions his disciples and pours out the Spirit on them at Pentecost, but it is bubbling up out of the ground throughout the Gospels as Jesus goes after “lost sheep.”

Jesus is the promised blessing to the nations of Genesis 12. Isaiah had cried out in frustration during the exile, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant ... I will make you a light to the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” Jesus is up to something big -- as big as the promises of God and bigger than Isaiah’s vision.

## JESUS AND ISRAEL'S SYMBOLS

**Land and People.** Jesus' disregard for the territorial interests of his generation stands out. He does not value Jewish nationalism tied to divine claims for the land. He does not engage in consultations that might secure the land from the Roman occupation. He never elevates Jerusalem to such a degree that it becomes a focal point of Jewish nationalism. He even anchors his work in Galilee, a region looked upon with scorn by residents of Judea.

He is willing to bless the occupier and hold up models such as Elijah and Elisha who traveled the land to bless residents in Damascus and Sidon. And when he does refer to the land, he offers it to the meek. The land is part of his theology of reversal. Those who fight to possess the land will be trumped by the meek.

All of Judaism's hopes for the land are subsumed into Christ. Christ is the new avenue to God, the unexpected connection between the Father and his people, the exclusive place of revelation and glory. The vision that all the land of the world has a divine claim on it was bursting into reality at the end of the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Not surprisingly, Christians refused to fight for Israel's land in the great war of A.D. 66-70. They fled, according to Eusebius, to the great Decapolis city of Pella on the east side of the Jordan River.<sup>120</sup> They were doing what Jesus told them to do.

Jesus' healings of the sick and his call to women, the sick and the "sinners" were expressions of his reconstitution of the people of God. Nobody is being left out. It is "whosoever will" time. As Isaiah prophesied in chapter 35, the sick, oppressed, and imprisoned were being healed and liberated rather than excluded. Jesus' vision of the people of God including all of Israel and the nations, as well as his vision of the "holy land" as every square inch of the planet is without precedent.

**Family.** Israel and the family are regathered around the person of Jesus. He commands, "Love each other as I have loved you" and says "He who does my will is my brother, sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35, John 13:34).

**Torah-Food Laws.** Jesus transforms and fulfills the Torah. He is the final and unrepeatable filling full of the promises of God. Jesus declares himself Lord of the Sabbath. As Lord, he can say "Moses said, but I say." His authority reaches out to declare obsolete the Jewish food laws. Though once the mark of the people of God, these laws have no authority in the reconstituted people of God that Jesus is forming. Yet his relationship to the Torah is fundamentally one of promise-fulfillment, not hostility and destruction. Jesus and Paul saw the promises of God to Abraham as being fulfilled in Jesus, and saw the Torah as a "mentor to lead us to Christ." After Christ comes, we now come to God directly by faith and not according to the works of the Torah (Galatians 3).

If, in fact, the sins of Israel are being forgiven, then the Lord God is doing it, and the true Israelites must be forgiving as an expression of what God is doing. Only God forgives sins, and if he is forgiving sins in Christ's name then the authority of Torah, temple and priesthood are all

on Jesus the Christ. The fellowship of the table with all who will to be forgiven and healed replaces the food laws. The fellowship of the table becomes the end times Torah.

**Temple.** Zechariah 8:19 said that when the Lord was delivering Israel and rebuilding the temple, there would be feasting, not fasting. This is happening in the ministry of Jesus who is feasting with Israel (Luke 15). Jesus overturns the tables in the temple and judges the temple as about to be destroyed and then rebuilt in three days. Clearly his resurrected, ascended body is the new temple. His people, who are the body of the resurrected Jesus on earth, become the temple of God on the earth (I Corinthians 3:16, 17; 6:19).

Symbols, whether it is a veil in a Turkish public building or a U.S. flag, carry tremendous meaning and power. Jesus' clash with Israel's symbolic world became a flashpoint of controversy and even prompted rage. The controversy dramatized the transformative character of the ministry of Jesus and His fulfillment of the promises of God.

### **JESUS AND JERUSALEM'S VIOLENT UNBELIEF**

Early on, Jesus had seen the tragedy of an unbelieving Israel. He sent his disciples to offer her the opportunity to repent of her political agenda against Rome. Israel was no longer turned toward the Lord, but was rather divided and obsessed with revolution and the preservation of the state of Israel. Israel rejects his offer to repent, to give up her agenda, and take on Jesus' agenda (Luke 13:1-9). Jesus said in Luke 22, Matthew 24, and Mark 13 that Israel's attempt at bringing in the kingdom of God was under judgment, and that Jerusalem would be destroyed.

Jesus, in his last week, referred to Israel as the wicked tenants who killed the landowners messengers (prophets) and ultimately his son. He prophesied the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and told his followers to abandon the city when the great destruction came. They were not to fight on the side of the Jews who would try to take control of Jerusalem from the Romans. They were to flee Jerusalem, which they did when the revolution broke out in A.D. 66. Jesus was vindicated by these events.

Jesus said the temple was to be destroyed but that in three days it would be rebuilt. He is obviously referring to his resurrected body as the central, unique ongoing place of the divine presence and glory on earth. But all such talk seemed utter nonsense the week of Jesus' death.

The kingdom did not come through the sword of the Zealots. The kingdom did not come by killing God's enemies. The kingdom came through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ the Lord. But at the outset, we were blind to it!

During that last dramatic week, Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, and like a mother hen seeks to put her babies under her wings when the great conflagration happens, so he sought to save Israel from herself, but she refused. Jesus cried bitter tears over such tragically violent nonsense (Matthew 23:37-39).

## **THE LORD'S SUPPER**

On the night before Jesus was betrayed, he celebrates the Passover meal with his apostles. The celebration of deliverance from Egyptian bondage flows into and is taken up into the hour of Jesus' own Passover for the whole world. At the moment of the eating of the unleavened bread, Jesus declares, "This is my body." At the moment of the drinking of the Passover wine Jesus declares, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew with you in my father's kingdom."

Jesus' action at the table is the equivalent in symbolic language (symbols are the most powerful form of communication) of those sayings about the Son of Man being delivered over and giving his life as a ransom for many (20:28). Identifying the bread and the wine with his body about to be broken and his blood about to be shed, and inviting his followers to share in it and find in it the gift of forgiveness of sins and of new life -- all of this action had and still has tremendous power in the church.

The holy war of the kingdom Jesus brings is fought with the sharp sword of the word of the gospel of love and power. We will always worship in this life a wounded God who advances the kingdom by the body and the blood of Christ and the word of our testimony.

The Lord's Supper tells the True Story of the world. The Lord's Supper symbolizes the death and continuing life of the resurrected Lord.

## **THE CRUCIFIED MESSIAH -- THE STORY LEAPS FORWARD**

The True Story of Israel had revealed a God who longs for communion with his people, who seeks to fill their hearts with his presence, and to see them redeemed from their sins and idols. The prophets testify of the heart of the God who agonizes over his people As a rejected lover who will not give up! It is such a strong longing in God's heart that it may be called "foolish love." This God who "weeps over Jerusalem" in 29 A.D. comes to commune with us and redeem us.

This background lets us see Jesus advance the Story by telling us that "the word becoming flesh" will redeem those he loved and who were powerless to liberate themselves! The incarnation of God and the cruciform character of his mission advances the redemption Storyline "once for all" in an unrepeatable and irreversible manner. The lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world liberates us from the bondage of sin as our redeemer and liberates us from the guilt of sin as our atoning sacrifice -- for the sins of the whole world.

The cross takes its rightful place in the Story of Jesus' earthly ministry, his announcement of the kingdom, and the gathering of a people for his name. Redeeming and forgiving the people liberates them for life in the kingdom as free people. The cross also creates a community; it reconciles those once alienated and as Paul is later to say makes us "one new man in place of the two" (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Not only is the cross personal and communal in its effects, it is also the place of the end times, once for all renewal of the entire creation. If anyone is in Christ he lives in a new world, and that world according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:14-20 is the fruit of the reconciling work of Christ on the cross. The cross not only results in our forgiveness, but in our transformation. We now live in Christ who on his cross defeated the powers who enslave and oppress us (Colossians 2:14-15). So Christ is not only lamb, he is victor on the cross.

Therefore, Jesus is resolute in walking out of Galilee where most of his ministry occurs to Jerusalem, where he enters on what we call Palm Sunday, knowing that this week is the moment of redemption, the moment of resolving the terribly convoluted plot which has exiled Israel from her God and her mission. It is the way of the cross. It is the way of atonement, of redemption, of reconciliation. It is love for the enemy walked out through great suffering and vision.

### **THE GREAT STRUGGLE FOR US ALL**

But this is an enormous trial for Jesus. Early on Satan had tempted him with good alternatives. Peter inadvertently did it again. The Lord God had come to minister to the shaken Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration to tell his Son he got it right -- his destiny is cruciform. Yet Jesus, alive in the Spirit at Gethsemane almost gives up the cross as his destiny. "Father if it is possible let this cup pass from me."

We are faced here with the full humanity of Jesus. Jesus did not just appear to be human. The idea that Jesus only appeared to be human was understood to be heresy from the beginning. His humanity is a mystery, but it is real. In Gethsemane he is looking for a way around the cross. Jesus is not a God who just appears to be human. He is God become flesh. He struggled, got tired, exasperated, and wept. He was really tempted. That means Satan got to him but did not turn him to act on it. Jesus struggled in Gethsemane as would we. We will never explain this mystery, but we will be blessed by it!

The drama is always in the details. Here things hang in the balance, just as it had on many other occasions. The lives of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, and Samson also hung by a thread, for in every instance they too were called to live in radical covenant faithfulness. They too were called to enter into the covenant partnership with the Lord God to advance the Story of redemption. It was of critical importance as to what they did, and so it was now more than ever! All of them were charismatic, and all of them had faith, but no one had faced such a daunting challenge -- a cross to the death.

After hours of struggling with the greatest of all temptations, Jesus states he is ready to go to the cross. The drama of redemption is never more real than in the Gethsemane Garden. Jesus fought out his struggle to submit to the God of the cross. He fought his doubts and cried out for help from God and his church, the apostles. God helped him. The church betrayed him! Jesus almost did not go to the cross. It was a moment of singular drama.

A Story that had become a deep, willful tragedy is taking the "turn of the ages." Tragedy is being defeated by "nails love," and the great surprise that laughter could come again to Jesus and his disciples is off stage waiting to invade the darkness of the tomb.

The drama is in the details. What we do in our prayer-struggles matters. Our lives are on the line. Our churches are on the line. Our marriages are on the line.

It is an awful moment in time as he walks through Holy Week, through the confrontation and judgment at the temple, to the Last Supper and the garden struggle, the mock trial and the crucifixion in Jerusalem. Nobody doubts that Jesus died in Jerusalem --not Josephus, not Tacitus the Roman historian, not Caiaphas who killed him. But why did he die and what happened next?

## **THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' CRUCIFIXION**

Jesus had said he would be killed. He referred to his disciples "carrying the cross," indicating he knew the way he would die, and embraced it as part of his vocation. In the Roman Empire, crucifixion was widespread, yet was looked on with universal horror and disgust. The victim was often flogged and tortured before being strung upon a cross at a crowded junction as deterrent to all.

It was the most humiliating death in the ancient world, a penalty reserved for rebellious slaves and terrorists against the state. The great senator and orator Cicero declared that "the very word cross should not only be far removed from the presence of a roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears." Not a single ancient historian paid any attention to a crucifixion. It was as if the crucified never existed.

Yet at least a third of the material in the gospels focuses on the last week of Jesus life. His cross is his glory. His cross is the way the lord god brings the kingdom of god to the world. The Story of Jesus' last supper, his arrest in the night, his mock trials at the hands of the Jews and the Romans, and his crucifixion beginning at about 9 a.m. Are told in all four gospels. Jesus died in public. He died by crucifixion in front of hundreds of witnesses.

The death, burial and the waiting from Friday to Sunday dramatize what happened on Sunday morning.

Jesus death was devastating to all who loved him. They were utterly bewildered. There was no move to continue on with the work of Jesus. What happened in the wake of his death was not foreseen by anyone.

The message of a crucified messiah subverted the world of religion. To the Roman pagans, the idea that God could die as a state criminal and that human salvation should depend on that historical event was not merely offensive, it was madness. To the Jews, a crucified messiah was a contradiction in terms, expressing not God's power but his inability to liberate Israel from Roman rule. So when the early disciples go out to tell the world that among its forgotten, crucified nobodies had been the Son of God, the Savior of the world, they were trying to preach what we would consider a public relations disaster!

It is the "madness" of the cross that compels us to take it seriously. It certainly was not a pious invention and neither was it a good way to self-promote. Nobody gained anything by preaching the foolishness of the cross. But it has a strange, enduring ring of truth in it. It was the only way through to resolve the dilemma at the very heart of the Story.

## **CHAPTER 21: THE RESURRECTION**

Jesus was crucified publicly on a Friday afternoon outside Jerusalem. He was buried. His body was placed in a tomb and there he remained till Sunday morning. The four written witnesses to his resurrection, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all report that on Sunday morning the women who came to the tomb to honor Jesus' dead body found that his body was no longer in the tomb. This does not immediately lead to the conclusion he arose from the dead. However, Jesus also appears to some of his disciples!

So we have an empty tomb and reports he has appeared to his disciples. These two bits of evidence are acknowledged by just about all scholars. Some, however, go on to assert that Jesus' disciples experienced Jesus as a living reality after his death, though he was not literally raised from the dead.

For first-century Jews, resurrection was not about religious experiences. It was about real bodies brought back from the dead. There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that a non-resurrection centered early Christianity somehow morphed into mythological stories told by the early church of a resurrected Jesus. From the very beginning, it was either he is raised from the dead or he is still in the tomb, and we are still in our sins!

But let's tell the Story of what happened after the resurrection and its place in the Story. For this moment in the Story is a pivotal moment in the True Story of the world!

### **A CLASH OF STORIES AND STORYTELLERS**

The challenge of living and telling the True Story of the world is dramatized in the post-resurrection Story of the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:13-24). In order to sense the magnitude of the Emmaus conversation of Resurrection Sunday remember that Jesus' contemporaries lived a controlling Story, based on a great scripture narrative, yet twisted by human sin, through which they believed the puzzles of their own time could be solved.

The controlling Story was often told as a new Exodus. When the enemies of God, whether Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks or Romans, would be militarily destroyed, the Lord would return to his temple in physical Jerusalem and the nations would stream to Jerusalem.

Jesus does not buy into this controlling Story. Rather he declares Israel and Jerusalem under judgment and headed for immediate defeat and destruction. Jesus declares the kingdom of God is coming, but he is a double revolutionary when he says the kingdom will come around a cross, a towel, and the bread and the wine.

He declares that Israel is being reconstituted around him and that the purposes of the Lord are going to be realized through him. Jesus will defeat the enemies of God on the cross, the Lord will return to his temple, who is Jesus and the people of God, and the good news of the kingdom will go out to the nations. Jesus, according to his rendition of the Story, is best understood as the plot-resolving fulfillment of the Story the scriptures tell!

These two stories are being told on the Emmaus Road. The difference in the telling changes everything!

## **STORYTELLING ON THE EMMAUS ROAD**

On Sunday after Christ's crucifixion, two utterly dejected disciples of Jesus are going home from Jerusalem. A stranger joins them on the way, inquiring, "What are you discussing as you walk along together?" They told the Story of Jesus and put it inside the Story they lived by. Their read of the True Story of the world was about holiness, zeal for God, the law and military revolt. The holy remnant of Israel with God on their side would defeat the pagan hordes. Jesus the Messiah would lead the revolt and establish the kingdom of God, but Jesus was crucified. Not only that, his body was now reported as stolen. They were devastated!

In their Story there was no place for a suffering Messiah. They had believed Jesus would be charismatic enough and powerful enough to drive Rome out, as David had conquered Israel's enemies in the 11th century B.C. and Judas Maccabeus had driven out the Seleucids in 164 B.C.

The two on the road to Emmaus envisioned the Messiah about like everybody else in Israel, and they were dejected over Jesus' death.

So what does the stranger do?

## **THE TRUE TELLING OF THE STORY**

The stranger tells the same Story but differently. He says, "How slow you are and how foolish not to believe all the prophets had said. Did not the Christ [the Messiah, the king] have to suffer to enter his glory?" He begins with Moses and the prophets, and explains to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning him.

Within the hiStory of Israel, within her prophets and the Psalms, there lay a consistent pattern to which they had been blind. When Israel was suffering terribly in Egypt, The Lord God had saved them through the Red Sea. When Israel cried to the Lord during the period of the Judges, he delivered them. When the Assyrians had Jerusalem surrounded, the Lord delivered Israel. Though Babylon would succeed where Assyria failed, the Prophets saw into the gloom and declared that it would be through the darkness and the suffering that the redemption would come.

Israel would be narrowed to a remnant (Isaiah 10:20-21). A servant (Isaiah 40-55), one like a Son of Man, a humble one who sits on the throne with the ancient of days would come (Daniel 7). Somehow, the redeeming purposes of God for Israel and through Israel for the world would be carried through the most intense suffering, to emerge the other side of exile as sins forgiven. The one of Isaiah 53 -- despised, rejected, pierced and crushed -- would redeem Israel, and the kingdom of God would finally be established.

So beginning with Moses and the Prophets, Jesus retold this Story. God's light and truth were there; it was the true telling of the True Story of the world. It was full of suffering, twists, and turns, and finally the glory of the cross and the resurrection.

## **VERSES 28-32**

The disciples ask the stranger to come and eat with them. He takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and begins to give it. First the exposition of Scripture's True Story, and then the breaking of the bread, word and sacrament, Story and symbol, truth and hospitality, gospel and fellowship, Word and Spirit. Then they recognized Jesus!

Jesus is recognized when the Spirit of God, working in conjunction with Scripture, is expounded so as to bring out the True Story of the world. The Lord is known in the blessing, breaking, and the giving of the bread, the fellowship meal when understood within the true telling of the True Story of the world.

From this moment on, men and women have realized by Spirit illumination that we now live in a new world.

## **VERSES 33-49**

The two disciples get up and return at once to Jerusalem to witness to the eleven and those with them. Then Jesus himself appears in his resurrected body to his disciples, inviting them to see his wounds and touch his skin. He then eats a piece of fish in their presence. Then he declares all of this a fulfillment of the law and the prophets and goes on to tell them the True Story that the Scriptures tell of a crucified and risen Christ.

So what does this mean? The resurrection of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, meant the rule of God was breaking into the world of death -- the rule of victorious, suffering love. Jesus was leading the greatest revolution in the hiStory of the world, the procession from death to life: the establishment of the kingdom of God through a cross. The resurrection confirms Jesus' cruciform vision: "The Son of Man must suffer and die in Jerusalem."

## **THE LOGIC OF THE RESURRECTION**

Immediately after his disciples come to faith in Jesus as the crucified messiah, Jesus declares, "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations" (24:47). This is the logic of resurrection and ascension. This was always a promise, not a command. This is Genesis 12 -- "you will bless the nations" -- 2000 years later being fulfilled! Time, pregnant with the purposes of God, was now giving birth! Jesus walks into this moment fully aware of its significance in the True Story of the world.

Jesus avoids exclusivist theology. Election is not just for our benefit; it is an instrumental election. Jesus avoids sword theology. Violence is out; it cannot redeem the world. Killing every terrorist on the planet will not bring in heaven on earth; it will only create more terrorists.

"You are witnesses of these things" (vs. 48). From the beginning a people for God's name are to be instruments of the blessing. Jesus calls his apostles, who symbolize the reconstituted people of God to be his witnesses to the nations of what the Lord is doing through Messiah Jesus. But they must first be filled with the presence of God! Jesus tells them, "I am

going to send you what my father has promised ... Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:48-49).

## **RESURRECTION AND THE TRUE STORY**

What remains implicit in Mark, at least as we have it, is made explicit in Matthew and Luke: Resurrection doesn't mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus' Lordship over the world. So, Matthew and Luke give us the clear message of what the resurrection means: Jesus is now enthroned as the Lord of heavens and earth. His kingdom has been established. And this kingdom is to be put into practice by his followers, summoning all nations to obedient allegiance to him, marking them out in baptism.

Jesus understands himself as a part of the great Story the Bible tells.

For Jesus, it is at the resurrection where all the old promises come true at last: the promises of David's unshakeable kingdom; the promises of Israel's return from the greatest exile of them all; and behind that, quite explicit in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the promise that all nations will be blessed through the seed of Abraham.

If Jesus has been raised, then this is how the Old Testament has to be read: as a Story of suffering and vindication, of exile and restoration, as a narrative that reaches its climax not in Israel beating the rest of the world at its own game, but in the suffering and vindication, the exile and restoration of the Messiah, not for himself alone but because he is carrying the saving promises of the Lord God. This is the Story he was telling on the road to Emmaus.

If a messenger bringing vital news falls into a river and is then rescued, he is rescued not for himself alone but for the sake of those who are waiting in desperate hope for his life-giving message. If Jesus is raised, Luke is saying, he really was and is the Messiah; but if he's the Messiah, he is God's messenger, God's promise-bearer, carrying the promises made to Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets -- promises not only for Israel but also for the whole world. Therefore, these Jewish apostles are called to go to the nations.

When Jesus appears to his disciples in Luke 24, and their eyes are opened as to his identity as the Messiah, they understand the Scriptures. What results is the new commission: “Repentance and remission of sins must be preached to the nations.” Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, and his Jewish disciples are going to live out Israel's true calling to bless the nations. Peter confirms this in Acts 3:24-26.

This is clearly the Jewish hope woven into the Scriptures from very early on that when the Lord God does for Israel what he is going to do, then the nations of the world will come to share the blessing.

Without the resurrection, Israel's Story is an unfinished and possibly tragic Story in which Israel can hold on to hope but with a sense that the narrative is spinning out of control.

For Luke, the point of the resurrection is that the long Story of Israel, the great overarching scriptural narrative, has reached its goal and must now give birth as it intended to

the worldwide mission in which the nations are summoned to turn from their idolatry and find forgiveness of sins and streams of living water.

At the very end of the Gospels, Jesus is commanding his disciples to go to the nations! The vision of Israel coming to Zion is transformed into Zion going to the nations. This is what the Lord had spoken to Abraham 2,000 years before. Now it is being resurrected by the true Israelite.

Jesus tells his disciples to “go make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20). Like the word “saints,” “disciples” is a self-designation of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1, 25, 26, 38; 11:26; 13:52). The apostles are to take care that communities of disciples are set up to live in radical faithfulness to Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew contains a worldwide perspective, but it never loses sight of concrete communities in which the new justice of the Sermon on the Mount would be lived (Matthew 5:20).

### **COMPARED WITH THE PRETENDERS**

The resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent events of the ascension and Pentecost, when compared with other Messianic movements of the time, suggests that in fact God was at work in the life of Jesus. Something very unique is happening in the post-resurrection Jesus movement.

For example, there were a dozen or so messianic claimants in the 50 years before and the 100 years after Jesus. Each proclaimed the rule of God, declared they were the Messiah (the one chosen to bring the kingdom rule of God to the earth), led an armed revolt, and were killed by the Romans. Their followers were dispersed and never heard from again.

Hezekiah in the 40s B.C. led a revolt and was killed by Herod the Great. His son Judas led another revolt ending in his death: an ex-slave named Simon was proclaimed king in 4 B.C. and the Romans killed him. Athronges, a shepherd, led a revolt at the same time and he too was killed. Simon and Athronges were both killed the year Jesus was born.

In the next twenty years after Jesus, three more would-be Messiahs declare their kingship, and all are killed by the Romans.

In A.D. 66, Simon and Menahem, two great messianic leaders, were killed by either the Romans or the Jews. A hundred years later, Simeon Ben Kosiba led a three-year messianic uprising and was then killed. Nobody claimed that any of these men were raised from the dead. They had lived violently and died violently. Their followers dispersed and were never heard from again.

And so the apparent fate of Jesus was not something new to these devastated disciples on the Emmaus Road in about 29 A.D.

Yet had they really understood Jesus? Compare Jesus with Hezekiah and his Messianic wannabes: He did proclaim the kingdom of God. He did not proclaim he was the Messiah, except to a few disciples and then declared he would be a crucified Messiah! He did not lead an armed revolt. He was not physically killed leading an armed revolt. In fact he restrained his disciples from armed resistance and surrendered to the authorities. His disciples dispersed on Friday

afternoon but beginning on Sunday, two days later, they began stirring for one reason: Jesus' body is not in the tomb!

I conclude my own long inquiry with strong convictions as to the resurrection of Jesus. John Updike expresses my sentiments in his wonderful poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter."

Make no mistake: if he rose at all  
it was as His body:  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules  
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fall,

It was not as the flowers,  
each soft Spring recurrent;  
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled  
eyes of the eleven apostles;  
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
the same valved heart  
that-pierced-died, withered, paused, and then  
regathered out of enduring Might  
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence  
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
faded credulity of earlier ages:  
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,  
not a stone in a Story,  
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow  
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us  
the wide light of day. ...

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous;  
for our convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are  
embarrassed by the miracle,  
and crushed by remonstrance.

### **GENESIS MEETS EASTER -- THE TRAJECTORY IS SET**

The resurrected Jesus is what happens, says author and musician Jeremy Begbie, When Genesis meets Easter. He is "new creation, first edition." In Jesus we see not only God's self-

revelation, but also what it means to be truly human. The risen Jesus is the “radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” The “truly human image of the invisible God and firstborn from among the dead [resurrected human beings], in whom all the fullness of the God’s deity lives in bodily form” (Hebrews 1:3-4; Colossians 1:15, 2:9). Resplendent in his renewed, transfigured human body, still bearing the mark of his wounds (Revelation 5:6; 1 Peter 2:24), He is seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, alight with the joy that made the cross enduring, already wearing our future glory (Hebrews 2:8; 12:2). This is the trajectory: Genesis, Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and resurrection of the entire creation!

## **RESURRECTION LEADS TO ASCENSION -- PENTECOST**

What happened on Resurrection Sunday led to Ascension-Pentecost, the second greatest eucatastrophe in the hiStory of the world, next to God becoming flesh. The Spirit who conceived Jesus in Mary’s womb conceived faith in the heart-wombs of 3,000 people! The rest is the Story of the descent of the dove.

On Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after Jesus’ death and resurrection, 3,000 people are baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah and Lord to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Why? They are brought to faith by the Spirit working through Peter’s sermon which concluded, “The God who raised Jesus from the dead has made him Christ and Lord.”

The kingdom pandemonium of Pentecost, which results from the ascended Lord pouring out the Spirit on his disciples, best explains the disappearance of Jesus’ body from the grave. Jesus has been raised from the dead and he is responsible for what is happening at Pentecost.

## **THE NARRATIVE LOGIC**

Narrative logic reveals the significance of Jesus’ resurrection. As David Hume was to observe many centuries later in modern terms, if Jesus was raised from the dead, that in and of itself proves nothing except that a first-century man in a backwater country somehow survived death. It is only within the context of Israel’s Story that Jesus’ resurrection assumes its supreme significance.

This was not just any man that died, but a man who took onto himself Israel’s Story. And within Israel’s Story, resurrection had long functioned as a symbol for the reconstitution of Israel, the return from exile, and the crowning redemption. The prophet Ezekiel for instance, saw the return of Israel in the figure of bones rising and taking flesh (Ezekiel 37:1-14). So Jesus’ resurrection becomes the monumental vindication of Israel’s claims and hopes.

Recall one more time Israel’s narrative logic. Israel’s God is universal, but is known as such only through the particular, the material and the historical. God elects Abraham, and from Abraham a nation, and from that nation, Jesus. Now God’s blessings flow from Israel and from Jesus to the entire world. God restores Israel; then building on that event, God seeks the Gentiles.

The early Christians saw themselves as continuing Israel's Story under new circumstances. The church understood itself now as messianic Israel covenanted with her risen Lord (Acts 2:36-38; 5:30-32). The church, with Jesus' headship, is the new temple, the sanctuary of the living God. She is in fact nothing less than the first fruits of a new humanity, reborn in the last Adam, named Jesus.

In short, the narrative works out so as to give the church understanding of herself as at once a community and a hiStory that is still unfolding and developing, embodying and passing along a Story that provides symbols through which its people gain their identity and their way in the world.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What was Jesus' one sermon?
2. Discuss the significance of his healings of the sick, his exorcisms and his going out after the outcasts.
3. How does Matthew go about telling us Jesus' place in the big Story?
4. By what title does Jesus refer to himself most often and what is its significance?
5. What is meant that Jesus was a double revolutionary?
6. Describe the two different stories being told on the road to Emmaus. Why does Jesus immediately tell his disciples in Luke 24 to go preach repentance and remission of sins to the nations?

## **CHAPTER 22: ACT 5 -- THE CHURCH**

There is a great turning of focus in the New Testament pages. In the first Testament, the reader senses that the focus has consistently narrowed. It begins with the broad canvas of creation and tells of the dealings of God with the whole race of mankind (Genesis 1-11). Then it narrows to the people Israel, whom the Lord God has called to be special servants of his purposes, then to the search for a pure remnant within Israel that is fit to be the vessels of the divine intention. At the center of the Bible's Drama the focus has narrowed to one man: Jesus, the Messiah. But from the Messiah the focus turns outward, first to the new Israel, which is his church, and then through that church into the entire world. The Story of the Messiah and his church is told in Luke and Acts.

### **THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN JERUSALEM**

The most striking event was the disciples leaving Galilee, even though the first appearances of Jesus took place there, and assembling in Jerusalem, where they awaited the

definitive revelation of the reign of God. Jerusalem was the place where, according to Jewish belief, the events of the last days would run their course. Since the coming of the Son of Man was expected, the conversion of the people of God was the most urgent command. Acts depicts the Christian preaching of repentance to unbelieving Israel in four sermons (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32).

The circle of the twelve was reconstituted after Judas Iscariot's death by the election of a new member (Acts 1). The reconstitution of the twelve, the offer of baptism and repentance, and the return to Jerusalem of the disciples establish that the end-times gathering of Israel initiated by Jesus was continued by the post-resurrection community of disciples in faithfulness to Jesus.

The baptized Israelites were drawn into the salvation given and established in Jesus (Acts 2:38). The renewed intention of gathering Israel presupposes that the community of disciples saw itself as the true Israel. The apostle Paul was later to declare that all who believe in Christ are the true descendants of Abraham, the people of God (Romans 4:16-17; Galatians 3:7, 29). As the Story unfolds in Acts, the reconstituted people of God expand to include the nations who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **THE RESTORATION OF THE KINGDOM TO THE WHOLE EARTH**

Immediately before Jesus' ascension in Jerusalem, his disciples ask, "Is this the time you will restore your kingdom to Israel?" Jesus' disciples are assuming that the kingdom is to be restored to Israel, but Jesus has in mind something much bigger -- the restoration of the kingdom of God to all the earth and the entire cosmos.

Jesus has now been raised from the dead as Israel's Messiah, as the Psalms and prophets insist. The Messiah is the world's true Lord. "His dominion shall be from one sea to the other, from the river to the ends of the earth" (Psalms 72:8, Isaiah 11:9). This is the true message of the Ascension Story of Acts 1 that follows: the one who ascends is enthroned as the divine Emperor.

## **EMPEROR OVER THE COSMOS**

Jesus takes command of his worldwide empire by sending his messengers, his emissaries into all the known territories of which he is already enthroned as Lord and to bring the good news of his wise and just rule on the throne. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:7-9). That is exactly the pattern that follows the whole book of Acts. The apostles are to go tell the world that Jesus the Jewish Messiah is the world's true Lord and to summon them to believing obedience. And that is exactly what they do from Jerusalem all the way to Rome itself.

So the remainder of the book of Acts answers the question, "Is this the time you will restore your kingdom to Israel?" The answer is when Paul arrives in Rome, the greatest Gentile city of the world, and declares that the God of Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham is the sole Lord of the world (see Acts 28). The message is that God will restore his rule over all empires and all creation.

## **KINGDOM RESTORED**

Salvation in Luke and Acts is not about going to heaven when you die but about God's kingdom rule being restored to the entire creation! We pray and we preach, "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom is advancing to the nations according to the Lord's purposes. Peter tells his hearers early on in Acts, "And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed." When God raised up his servant [Jesus], he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (Acts 3:25-26).

## **A TWO-STAGE PROCESS**

The covenantal promise of the Lord to Abraham is being fulfilled after 2,000 years. Yet there is more to come. For the reigning Messiah, the Lord of the world, is coming to restore all things. Peter, speaking about the crucified and ruling King Jesus in Acts 3:21 said, "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything as he promised long ago through the prophets." Within Peter's words is the "now" of the kingdom coming and the "not yet" of the kingdom. There is fulfillment, and yet there is the promise and expectation of all things being restored. The salvation of persons takes place inside the salvation of the entire creation.

## **JESUS IS EXALTED TO THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD**

The remarkable Ascension scene at the end of Luke provides a dramatic closure not only to that Gospel and the Story of Jesus but to the hiStory of Israel. It also provides the interpretive key to the hiStory of the new people of God as recounted in the book of Acts. For Peter declares at the outset that Jesus, the ascended One, has poured out his Spirit on all those who call on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:14-42). Throughout the entire book of Acts the Spirit, poured out by the exalted Lord on men and women who call on the name of the Lord, is the prime mover. This is true in all of the letters written to the church. Yet the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, for he is the One giving the Spirit to his people.

## **REIGNING AT THE RIGHT HAND -- NOT IN JERUSALEM**

In Acts 2 Jesus is declared to be "at the right hand of God." Jews expected the Messiah to rule on the throne with God in Jerusalem, and from there rule over a worldwide realm. The throne Peter describes, however, is not in Jerusalem, but in heaven, "far above all rule authority power and dominion." God's kingdom has no boundaries. Jesus reigns over all human life, all hiStory and all nations. This is a transformative fulfillment of all that has been prophesied regarding the coming Messiah.

Jesus, ruling and reigning at the right hand of God, means Jesus exercises power on behalf of the Father, has the place of supreme honor, is accessible to the entire creation as Lord of the cosmos, and has authority as Creator and Redeemer of the world to rule and reign. Yet Jesus as Lord is very different than Caesar being Lord. Jesus works through willing and obedient individuals who are willing to suffer for his name. Jesus is present to us through his Spirit who lives in us.

### **THE ARRIVAL AT JOURNEY'S END**

Jesus has not only ascended to the Cross but also to the right hand of God, both for the sake of the people and their kingdom hopes. The sermon in Acts 2 is about the ascension of Jesus to God's throne from which the Spirit goes forth (Acts 2:36-38). Pentecost is thus the announcement of the arrival of Jesus at journey's end. Peter's sermon in Acts 2, citing at least three royal Psalms, rings out the triumphant note sounded already by Christ at his trial: "From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God" (Luke 22:69, Acts 2:33).

### **THE END OF A TORTURED STORY**

After the magnificent creation of Genesis 1-2 humankind descends into rebellion, chaos and death. The entire scriptural narrative, including the hiStory of Israel as a people through whom the Lord will redeem the world, herself descends into chaos. Every high priest is thrust out, barred from the holy of holies for another year. Every king is carried down from his throne in exile or death. The messianic and priestly charlatans abound in their descents into ignominious oblivion.

So when the true High Priest and Messiah does come, he comes toward this sacred ascension as the High Priest and King to change forever the destiny of us all. He has come for nothing less. So when Peter can confidently declare that "God has made Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ, setting him at the right hand of God" forever and ever, the great journey is over, the Last Days have begun (see Acts 2:14-42).

### **HEAVEN ON EARTH**

When Jesus was exalted to heaven it did not mean that Jesus went far away. Heaven is not a space-time place, but a matter of the divine dimension all around us. Heaven intersects and interacts with us all around us. The church herself is called a "colony of heaven" on earth (Philippians 3:21). Heaven lives in the church, whose citizenship is heaven. The church, the body of the exalted Christ, is an outpost of heaven, a sign of who and what is coming!

## **THE EXALTED CHRIST POURS OUT HIS SPIRIT**

By the second century B.C., Pentecost had lost its original focus as a harvest festival. Instead it celebrated the covenant renewal of Israel and the inclusion of the nations within the covenant God made with Abraham. Now, at this feast of Pentecost, the Spirit comes in fulfillment of the expectation and hope.

The Old Testament promised that in the last days the Spirit would be poured out on the servant Messiah (Isaiah 42:1) on Israel (Ezekiel 37:14) and on all people (Joel 2:28-32). After the resurrection, Jesus promises his disciples that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on his followers and tells his disciples to wait in Jerusalem.

Jesus ascends, and ten days later, on Pentecost Sunday, the Spirit descends on his disciples. Tongues of fire rest on their heads and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. These two signs of wind and fire are significant. In Ezekiel 37 the sovereign Lord says “Come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe into these slain that they may live.” The wind of God often means the power of God to bring a new life. The fire often represents the presence of God, as it did at the burning bush and at Sinai (Exodus 3:2, 19:18).

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost signals the advent of the “Last Days.” The church saw herself as the end-times community of the Lord, the people of the kingdom, already living in the power of the age to come. Peter, at the beginning of his Pentecost sermon, quotes Joel 2, “In these last days God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people.’” Peter is declaring the advent of the Last Days. The unmistakable sign of these last days is the Spirit.

Therefore, the church is to focus in these last days between the resurrection and the consummation of the kingdom on the task of proclaiming the gospel to the entire world and summoning men to its rule (Acts 2:17; 1 Peter 1:5, 20; Hebrews 1:2, 2; Timothy 3:1).

## **AGENTS TOGETHER OF TRANSFORMATION**

The resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit are not designed to take us away from this earth but rather to make us agents together of the transformation of this earth, anticipating the day when, as we are promised, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

When the risen Jesus appears to his followers at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, he declares that “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to him. When John hears the thundering voices in heaven, they are singing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever.”

And the point of the Gospels and Acts is that this has already begun. Peter preaches the gospel of the kingdom on Pentecost as a redeemed agent of the transformative gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord. Peter, a broken believer, is not only a preacher; he is the first public, Spirit-filled witness to the presence of the kingdom come to this world.

## **THE SPIRIT OF GOD ANNOUNCES THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN JESUS**

When the Spirit came on the disciples in Acts 2, the disciples began speaking in languages that everyone in attendance all heard in their native language.

The question in Acts 1 was how God would fulfill the promise to extend his kingdom, his saving and sovereign rule, not only in Israel but through Israel to reach the rest of the world. In other words, the question had to do with how God was going to fulfill what he had said to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: “In you, and in your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed.” And this promise to Abraham comes directly after the dramatic chapter of the tower of Babel, in which the people sought to make a name for themselves. God subverted their plans by confusing their languages and making it impossible for them to understand one another and work together.

Now Luke is implying that the curse of Babel is being overturned; in other words, God is dramatically signaling that his promises to Abraham are being fulfilled, and the whole human race is going to be addressed with the good news of what has happened in and through Jesus.

Peter stands up and delivers a sermon to explain what has happened to Jesus’ followers. He says that all they are seeing and hearing is the fulfillment of Joel 2. He then preaches the good news of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus. All the hopes of Israel for the coming of the kingdom, for the end of exile, and for the gathering of Israel and the nations are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, Lord of all.

## **THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM COME**

The new community is formed by the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Christ; it is not a proclamation of how one gets saved but a proclamation of the mighty acts of God culminating in Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah and Lord of the world. At Pentecost, Peter announces these four accomplishments, which result in a change of Lordship:

In Jesus of Nazareth, specifically in his Cross, the decisive victory has been won over the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves;

In Jesus’ resurrection, the new age of the Spirit has dawned, inaugurating the long-awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel’s exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one Creator God;

The crucified and risen Jesus was all along Israel’s Messiah, her representative king;

Jesus was therefore also the Lord, the true king of the world, the one at whose name every knee would bow. The sermon ends, “God has made this same Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

This fourfold dimension of the Christian good news, which we announce as the best news ever, is not only declared in Peter's first sermon, Acts 2:14-36, but is also referenced in the sermons of Acts 3 and 13 as well as Romans 1-5, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:8, 1 Corinthians 15 and Philippians 2:5-11.

### **THE SPIRIT REGATHERS THE PEOPLE OF GOD FROM DEATH TO LIFE**

Peter's words recorded in verse 36 of acts 2 devastated his hearers. At the end of this sermon the hearers were cut to the heart and cried out, "What shall we do?" Many of those who heard had conspired to kill Jesus, their Messiah. The gospel of the kingdom devastated them, convicting them of their horrendous arrogance, their twistedness and rebellion. But it also compels them to cry out, "What shall we do?" for the gospel is not about making and leaving us hopeless, but turning us to the living God.

### **THE LIFE-GIVING SPIRIT**

When they cried out in despair, they were told to "turn to God who is near and who is good and be baptized [immersed] in water in order to receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit." This immersion was understood to be for desperate sinners, hopeless but for God and his grace. Immersion signifies "death to sin and life to God."

For those who declare their hopelessness and their desperation for God's grace, the Spirit of God comes to give them newness of life, to raise them to a new life as children of God. Three thousand are baptized. The Spirit comes on all of them, women and men. The Spirit coming confirms the prophecy of Psalms 110 that Jesus is Lord, exalted to the right hand of the Father, and the identity of the Spirit as the one Joel prophesied would be coming in the last days.

Turning to the God who is bringing his kingdom to this earth, and being immersed as a sign of humility before this gracious presence, empties us for his purposes and his presence.

The church has never been about being "the good guys." The church is the "called out." It is those desperate for God. Pentecost answers Ezekiel's question from six hundred years before, "Can these bones live?" With a resounding yes! The Spirit gives life to dead and bleached bones.

### **CHAPTER 23: END-TIMES COMMUNITY**

Pentecost inaugurates Act 5 of the Great Drama; a new community living in the new world of the resurrected and ascended Lord. The Lord lives through the power and presence of the Spirit of God. It happened on Pentecost Sunday, the harvest Sunday for Israel. The Spirit coming on all who call on the name of the Lord gives life, communion, and power to human beings who were dead, divorced from God, and impotent even to pray.

Though the Spirit-filled community of Acts 2 is in one sense new to hiStory, it also stands in historical continuity with the Old Testament nation that had its origin in Abraham. God formed Israel to be a "light to the nations," but the Israelites did not live up to their calling, so

God sent them into exile. Nevertheless, he promised to gather again his people one day, pouring out his Spirit on them so that they might live out their calling. The prophets looked forward to the day when Israel would be regathered. Peter declares that what the Spirit prophesied in Joel 2 is now being fulfilled (Acts 2:14-36).

The Holy Spirit who conceives Jesus in Mary's womb now conceives Jesus' community with a charter membership of 120 of Jesus' followers. And Mary is there to see it and be part of it!

It was the fulfilling of Jeremiah's longing, chapter 31, for God's presence to create new hearts. It wasn't mere optimism or positive thinking. It was the restoration of the presence of God to the people of God after 600 years of absence. It was the transformation of dry bones into temples of the Spirit (Ezekiel 37). What a surprise -- then and now!

The electing Lord God had always predestined to send Jesus and to create a people for his name. At Pentecost the reconstituting of a people for his name begins to happen as the divine energy is poured out on the world (Acts 2:1-42).

### **ONE HEART AND MIND**

A community of one heart and mind takes place as God's Spirit begins living in believers. The Greek verb *homothumadon* is literally translated "one heart and mind." This is the divine energy working in a church desperate for God. The church continues in the "apostles doctrine, the fellowship-the sharing, the breaking of bread and the prayers." The Spirit who causes all to understand the preaching in their own language now creates unity and sharing of possessions, thereby destroying all barriers and creating communion among believers (Acts 2:42-47).

Arrogant individualism in Genesis 11 strove to build a tower to heaven without having to bother with the God of heaven. The attempt disintegrated into a snake pit of sects, each incomprehensible to the other. Babel is the mother city of sectarianism. With the call of Abraham, the long, slow, complex, and continuing movement to pull all these selves into a people of God community began. The birthing of Jesus' community on the day of Pentecost was an implicit repudiation and reversal of Babel sectarianism.

All of this happens in Jerusalem, as it had been prophesied that the Messiah would rule from Jerusalem. Yet according to Acts 2:14-42, the Lord Jesus does not rule from Jerusalem. He rules in heaven and his new community is created in Jerusalem as the Spirit communicates the gospel to the Jews from Palestine and the nations.

### **DOCTRINE, SHARING, EATING AND PRAYING**

After Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus "continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, the fellowship [koinonia], the breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2:42). The apostles' teaching or doctrine is their teaching or doctrine regarding the Story, the identity of Jesus. Just as Jesus had

shared bread with throngs of people so does his body, his new covenant community share their goods.

Eating, for Jesus, signifies the breaking-in of God's gracious kingdom hospitality and constitutes a physical celebration of the graciousness of God come to this world. Jesus had literally built the kingdom around a table and a cross. Breaking bread with sinners was a visible sign of the kingdom—an open table to which all are invited to come, a table without boundary or exclusion. We share our lives and eat together with one another as redeemed saints because this is the hospitality Jesus brings to the world.

This same Jesus, while eating his last Passover meal with his disciples, instituted as the new covenant meal for his disciples the bread, "This is my body," and the wine, "This is my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:14-23). Jesus calls his disciples to remember him as the Passover Lamb, to eat the Lord's Supper, remembering his death until he eats it anew with them in his kingdom (Luke 22:14-23).

All of this eating in the life of Jesus and the early church embodies the gracious welcome that God gives all who follow Jesus. Eating together was a declaration of kinship, love, and acceptance, containing far more symbolic power than a sermon.

## **THE MEAL OF RECONCILIATION**

Jews and Gentiles did not ordinarily share a common meal. The world was torn asunder with alienation and suspicion. Yet Luke reports in Acts 20:7 that the church at Troas, Jews and Gentiles, are "breaking bread," probably referring to the common meal that included the bread and the wine as instituted by Jesus. These meals demonstrate the practical unity and care existing in these communities for one another. The church celebrated her Lord's death as her Messiah and Lord, and embodied his love in sharing, eating, and waiting on one another. Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:24-32 and 11:17-34 calls these feasts the Lord's Supper. Jude referred to these meals as "love feasts" (Jude 12).

Breaking bread together, an ancient act of table fellowship, unity, and kinship, disappeared when sin and violence began fracturing communities and alienating ethnic groups (Genesis 3-11). "In Christ" the Lord Jesus calls formerly separated peoples to the sharing of table fellowship -- an act of unity, friendship, and celebration. These meals in Jesus' life and ours are signs of the kingdom coming, and they anticipate the coming consummated kingdom of God.

Remember the stinging rebuke Paul administered to Peter when he refused to eat with Gentile believers. Paul describes such racist behavior as "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14). Eating together as an expression of the hospitality of God should not be ignored.

Act 5 of the Story is compelling believers to act toward Gentiles in ways unimaginable to the likes of Ezra or Nehemiah in Act 3 of the Story. These inclusive meals witness to the cross as God's instrument of reconciliation between the Jews and the nations (Ephesians 2:11-22). Jesus is our peace, and eating together has always demonstrated that. The cross advanced the kingdom

in ways that healed the enmity of the nations, delivering us from religious and ethnic sectarianism. These inclusive meals demonstrated what God had done for the world. “Walking in line with the truth of the gospel” means practicing hospitality in ways that would have been considered unclean and immoral at an earlier time (see Leviticus and Ezra).

In an affluent, fast-food, and glutton-ravaged society, it is difficult for us to discipline our minds and hearts to see and embody the significance of these kingdom meals! For us, eating is not a kingdom witness. But the Lord’s Supper-love feast is not a Christian add-on. It is at the heart of who we are as the people of God.

## **PRAYER AND THE ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Luke records five prayers of Jesus in his gospel (Luke 1:38; 1:46-55; 1:68-79; 2:14; 2:29-32). Prayer threads throughout the book of Acts in continuation of what Luke reported in his Gospel. Prayer is the breathing of the new community. As the Holy Spirit works revealing Jesus as Lord, the church prays, speaking to God in responsive speech (see 4:24-31; 7:59; 9:10-19; 9:36-43; 10:2, 9, 31; 12:5, 12; 13:3; 14:23; 15:28; 16:13,16; 16:25; 20:36; 22:17; 27:23-26; 27:35-36). References to the Holy Spirit now quicken. The references to the Holy Spirit in Luke’s gospel increase in Acts, a document about the same length as the gospel. We are not to lose sight of the foundational Jesus Storyline: what the community does and says and prays is continuous with what Jesus does and says and prays. This is the same Jesus Story that we read in the gospel, but without Jesus being visibly and audibly present. The Holy Spirit is God’s way of being present and active among us in the same way that he was in Jesus. From the very beginning, the mighty works of Jesus continue in the early church of the book of Acts.

## **THE SPIRIT IN CONVERSION**

There is no systematic or predictable sequence of conversion, such as faith, repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit comes on Cornelius during Peter’s sermon, but does not come on the water baptized Samaritans until the Jerusalem apostles go to Samaria and lay hands of fellowship on them. The Spirit comes in Acts 1 on the 120 with no reference to water baptism. The Spirit comes immediately after water baptism in Acts 2. The Spirit gives the gift of speaking in tongues to some who are water baptized, but other conversion stories make no reference to tongue speaking given as a gift.

In every instance the Spirit is coming to Lordship faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord of the world. “The wind blows where it will.” In all instances the Spirit is working out the spread of the gospel of the kingdom of God to the world. For example, the Spirit coming on Cornelius is a powerful testimony in favor of recognizing Cornelius as a follower of Jesus. The Spirit is blowing the gospel out of the environs of Jerusalem Jews.

The Spirit converts the church to Jesus as Lord of the world, compelling the Jerusalem apostles to go to Samaria and lay their hands on the baptized Samaritans. The unity that the Spirit

brings and the moving of the Spirit in and through the church out to the Roman world leads us to name the book of Acts “the Acts of the Spirit of God.”

Water baptism is an initiating action of God which symbolizes the radical movement in the baptized life from death to life, and from the Jewish or Gentile stream of identity and community into Jesus and his new community. “By one Spirit were you all baptized into one body.” Water baptism forever symbolized the radical reordering and regenerating of the new life in Christ.

### **MIGHTY WORKS CONTINUE**

The Spirit’s mighty works are signs of the kingdom of God come to this earth. They are a sign during the life and ministry of Jesus and continue being a sign of the kingdom in the life of the body of Christ as described in Acts. This does not mean that nobody got sick and died. Everyone Jesus or Paul healed subsequently died, but the “mighty works” were signs of God’s love and power come to this world in the person of Jesus Christ the Lord.

The early church, as well as the church of the last 2,000 years, has been called to live in power in the “now” of the kingdom come, while also being called to live in the “not yet” of the kingdom coming. Far too often the church has lived in the “not yet” to the exclusion of the “now” of the kingdom. The church, as Christ’s body in the end times, is called to the wonderful, creative tension of living in the “now” and the “not yet” of the kingdom.

This means we pray expectantly for manifestations of the kingdom while also living in hope, having a confident expectation that God is going to complete what he has begun. All those who die now in Christ are taken up into the “not yet” promise that the kingdom coming will ultimately destroy death.

God works through a believing, submitting church. There is no bullying of the church; the Spirit works with believing cooperation. Peter, for example, responds to the vision leading him to Cornelius’ house. He overcomes his reluctance, preaches the gospel, and the Spirit comes in power.

The breaking out of the gospel to the nations is the work of God, but it never would have happened except for Jesus’ surrender in Gethsemane and the apostles waiting in submission for the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. We are co-workers with God. The drama is in the details of our co-working with God.

### **DRAMATIC ADVANCEMENT OF STORYLINE**

The Storyline now tells of the Lord Jesus, ascended to the right hand of the Father, sending his Spirit on believers in Judea, Samaria, and Rome, thereby creating a people for his name all over the world. Genesis 12 now rings in our ears as the promise of God at last is being fulfilled on this earth

The Lord is coming to Jerusalem, but not to inhabit the Jerusalem temple. The Lord inhabits the people of God who are the new temple. Israel's past is fulfilled in the new community, but the expectations are being expanded and transformed. There is a fulfillment that transforms and expands the blessing like a wonderful adulthood transforms and expands the blessing and promise of childhood. From Jerusalem the gospel of the kingdom will go out in the Lord's portable temples, his church.

Remember that during Jesus' ministry, the regathering of Israel had already begun. He had appointed 12 apostles, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, to be the foundation of his new community, the new nation of God's people. At Pentecost, in response to Peter's preaching and to the power of the Holy Spirit, three thousand people were added to that newly reconstituted people of God who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

The remainder of the book of Acts tells the Story of how the Spirit of God through this new community of believers continues Jesus' mission of announcing the kingdom and gathering the lost from within Israel, then moves beyond old ethnic and cultural barriers to gather Samaritans and then Gentiles into the kingdom.

### **THE NARRATIVE IS PLAYING OUT**

The church does not initially go out to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth as her Lord had commanded. However, she is aware that what is happening is part of the Great Story: that the narrative is playing out among them, that the long barrenness of exile was over, that the Lord was doing a new work, and that this work was the fulfillment of the Lord's promises.

“Indeed all the prophets from Samuel on have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed. When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways” (Acts 3:24-26).

Peter is declaring the continuity of Jesus the Messiah and Lord with Abraham and the prophets. The True Story of the world is moving into the last dramatic resolution of the plot created by the rebellion of the divine image-bearers, the apostasy of Israel, and the promise of the creator God to bless the world through Jesus.

### **KINGDOM AND POLITICS**

The shape of what we call the book of Acts works itself out in terms of the gospel of the kingdom rule of Christ as this rule impacts on politics. The first half of Acts, up to chapter 12, has Jesus announced as the Messiah, King of the Jews, under the wary eye of the Jewish authorities and the Herod family. Finally, Herod Agrippa, who killed James and tried to kill Peter, dies a violent death. This incident is also reported by Josephus.

Then in the second half of the book, Paul confronts Caesar's empire with the news of its new Lord and ends up in Rome, proclaiming God's kingdom and teaching about Jesus as Lord, openly and without hindrance. There could not be a much clearer statement of intent: the

kingdoms of the world are now claimed as the kingdom of Israel's God, and of his Messiah who is also Lord of the world. The basis of all of this is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, who is enthroned as Lord.

In other words, this Jesus is not a private truth or a religious experience. Jesus is Lord of Caesar and Herod. Caesar and Herod knew the threat Jesus posed and tried to wipe him out.

### **THE SPIRIT ACTS TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL TO THE NATIONS**

Acts narrates the progress of the gospel of the kingdom from a small gathering of Jewish disciples in Jerusalem across formidable ethnic, cultural, relational, political, and geographical boundaries, from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and the nations.

Throughout Acts right through Paul's bold and unhindered preaching of the risen and ascended Jesus to the Gentiles in Rome, the book is an unmistakable Story of missionary expansion and progress reports. The Spirit, in concert with the proclamation of the kingdom, creates new community.

### **DANGEROUS STORYTELLING**

Stephen, a deacon in the Jerusalem church who is a man of the Spirit and power, is accused in Acts 7 of speaking against God, Moses, and the temple. Stephen's speech recites the work of God through Abraham, Moses, the kings, and the prophets. Stephen says Israel has lived unfaithfully. She rejects Moses' leadership, choosing to worship idols instead. He recites the prophetic indictment of Israel as an idol-worshipper. He recites Moses' prophecy in Deuteronomy that the Lord God would send Israel a prophet, referring to Jesus.

Throughout the Story, Stephen tells them that the Lord God is at work outside the temple environs: He called Abraham, revealed himself to Moses, and led Israel through the Red Sea and the wilderness. He led Israel into the Promised Land and the tabernacle of the Lord God's presence was in Jerusalem through the reign of David and Solomon's building of the temple.

Stephen is declaring two things: the Lord God has worked to redeem Israel outside the temple and Israel has consistently disobeyed and worshipped idols. He concludes powerfully by pointing out that Israel's rejection of the prophets has continued to that day because she has murdered the righteous One. "God does not live in temples made with human hands. God is in the righteous One you have murdered." Stephen's words got him killed, and persecution breaks out.

Stephen is stating exactly what the Old Covenant Scriptures declare to be the True Story. He tells the Story powerfully and then declares prophetically their murder of Jesus. The True Story elicits praise of God but it also elicits murderous opposition. Stephen's faithfulness to the Story gets him killed. He was not the last!

## UNPLANNED EXPANSION

Because of persecution and the Spirit's work in the lives of submitted believers, the kingdom expands beyond the borders of Judaism (Acts 8-10). The Gentiles are blessed through the witness of Philip in Samaria and Peter to the Roman soldier.

The witness of the apostles in Jerusalem is confirmed by the vibrant faith of the people of God who share all things and serve one another. The *basileia* (the kingdom), *koinonia* (sharing), the *diakonia* (the serving), and *leitourgia* (the worship) are all evident in the new communities.

### SAMARITANS, ROMAN SOLDIERS AND WOMEN

Philip preaches the good news of the kingdom in Samaria. Those who come to faith in the Messiah do not receive the Spirit until the Jerusalem apostles lay their hands on these believers. The apostles' laying on of hands validates the Samaritans as members of the Messiah's new community. The alienation of the past is being healed. For 700 years the Samaritans had been hated by the Judean Jews as half-breeds, the result of Assyrians intermarrying with Jews and heretics because they only acknowledged the Pentateuch as their true Scriptures.

Salvation obliterates ethnic alienation. Reconciliation (to be friends again) is the polar opposite of alienation. Alienation is inherited in Adam; reconciliation is in Christ.

The Spirit brings together a spiritually seeking Roman soldier, Cornelius and a Judean Jew, Peter. When Peter goes to Cornelius' house -- in violation of much of the book of Leviticus -- to tell Cornelius about Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes on Cornelius in the middle of the sermon. Then Peter baptizes Cornelius and his household.

Peter defends this hospitality and this inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God to the Jerusalem church. He argues that if God gives his Spirit to Cornelius as he had to Peter and to thousands in Jerusalem, then how could Peter withhold baptism from Cornelius? (Acts 11:1-18). Thus, the gospel is being preached to the nations. The promises of God to Abraham are being fulfilled.

Among those who are invited and embraced are women, who receive equal billing with the Gentiles in Luke's gospel. All of the gospel writers are inclusive of women, but especially Luke. He includes Jesus' mother's believing prayer ("May it be done unto me as you have said"), the discipling of women, the prostitute who anoints Jesus' feet, the fact that women are witnesses to the resurrection, the recognition of Joel's words coming to pass (that "your sons and daughters shall prophesy"), the fact that Priscilla is listed before Aquila in Acts, and Philip's four prophesying daughters. Clearly, women are prominent in Luke and Acts as well as throughout the early church.

The redemptive work of Christ has brought both the nations and women into the people of God as full members of the body of Christ.

## **CHURCH REREADS AND RETELLS THE STORY**

Peter is being swept along by the work of the Lord, but also struggling to catch up to the one who runs ahead of him. In chapter 11 of Acts, Peter defends the conversion of Cornelius as a witness to the power of God. The Jerusalem church prays, seeks the Spirit's leading, and rereads her Scripture. She concludes by celebrating this startling work of God among the nations (see Acts 9-11).

The God of the end-times church is not an ethnic deity who only hangs out with Jews and Christians. This God is moving out ahead of his church, in the lives of the Ethiopian eunuch, the Roman soldier, the citizens of Lystra, and the worshippers of the unknown god of Athens. The "common grace" of God is everywhere, and the presence is running ahead. Jesus is already Lord of all the powers and his Spirit broods over the rebellious sons of God all over the world! Disciples never bring God to a particular location. They just name the Presence and tell the True Story of the world.

## **APOSTLE TO THE NATIONS**

Luke records in Acts 9 the conversion of Saul, a fanatical devotee of the Shammai sect of the Pharisee party. Saul is an avowed enemy of the Christian church. On the road to Damascus, Jesus the resurrected One appears to Saul and asks him why he is persecuting Jesus. Saul is blinded and led into town. For more than 16 years, the Lord rebuilds Saul's faith and life around the reality of the resurrected Christ. In A.D. 47, Paul and Barnabas set sail from Antioch in Syria on the first of three missionary trips to what is now Turkey and Greece.

In city after city in Asia Minor and Greece and Macedonia, Paul announces the kingdom rule of Jesus, first to the Jews and then the nations. This proclamation to the nations declares a new age of the kingdom and a reconciliation of all peoples to God and to one another in one body. New communities (churches) are formed, and elders are appointed to shepherd these end-times communities.

## **PREACHING THE GREAT STORY**

In Acts 13, Paul says in the synagogue in Antioch that "the God of Israel who chose our fathers, gave them the land of Canaan and raised up King David has raised up Jesus from the lineage of David." He quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah to show that Jesus, the resurrected one, is a greater king than David, and that David prophesied of such a king. He warns them from Habakkuk of scoffing at Jesus. Not only is the Old Testament in the New, but Jesus is in the Old Testament.

The stories of Acts 3 and Acts 5 complement one another organically, expanding the significance of the specific parts.

All of these believers came to God through faith on Jesus as the Christ and the Lord of the world. They were all justified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and were baptized into

Christ to receive the forgiveness of sins and the promised filling of the Spirit. None were required to be circumcised.

For Paul there is an unbreakable continuity between the gospel of Jesus and the Old Testament Story. He considers all believers in Christ to be children of the promise to Abraham, that all would be blessed through Israel (see Romans 4, Galatians 3:2). Yet he considers the law only a tutor to bring us to Christ. The law has served its purpose but is no longer the community-forming word it was during the prior era. For this reason, Paul refused to make Gentiles become Jews before they become disciples of Jesus.

### **BAPTISM SIGNIFIES A NEW BEGINNING**

All come to God through Christ by faith expressed in baptism. The coming of the Spirit on all who call on Jesus as Lord and Savior gives life to all who come by faith. All are forgiven of their sins and are placed in Christ, a place of covenant shalom. All are immediately baptized by one Spirit into the body of Christ, the organic new house churches (see 1 Corinthians 12:13.)

### **THE STORY PULLS US INTO A NEW WORLD**

In all their proclamations, Stephen, Peter, and Paul are absolutely faithful to the Story, but are retelling and expanding it to include God's action in Jesus the Christ to save the world. The Lord God of our ancestors, in fulfillment of the purposes for which he called Abraham, gave the law, and built the temple, is now doing a new thing. He has sent the crucified Messiah who is Lord of the world. The Word of God is moving the Story forward and quite deliberately getting to new points as it does. We now live in a new world "in Christ."

### **FROM EXCLUSION TO EMBRACE**

This new world of the kingdom gospel brings together Jews and Gentiles, slave and masters, men and women to full citizenship, all Spirit-filled, into communities based on the confession of Jesus as the Savior and Lord of the world. Paul explains in his letters to the churches that all of this was the plan of God from eternity. The call of Abraham is the key to understanding the original vision. Jesus was the elect from all eternity, Savior of us all. God has elected to always have a people for his name. He has predetermined the shape of the godly life. We are now his workmanship (see Ephesians 1-3).

When we were dead in our sin, "God who is rich in mercy made us alive together in Christ." We move from death to life. But at the same time, he moved us from being strangers to friends in Christ, from being foreigners to fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven, from the exclusion of the law to the inclusion of family within the gospel of the kingdom.

It is this physical, embodied sharing in Christ that is controversial. How can these unclean Gentiles be full fellow citizens of the kingdom, members together in the same house

church, and participants together at the same table of hospitality? The answer: “by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2:1-10).

Communities of Jews and Gentiles together, under the Lordship of King Jesus, happen wherever the good news is received as the Word of God. Paul’s goal is to establish witnessing communities in every part of the Roman Empire (Romans 15:17-22).

### **REREAD THE STORY AND PRAY**

At the outset, however, when all of this was stunning the world, the early church had to pray, reread Scripture, and discern what God was doing in the world. It was not immediately clear. This gospel of the kingdom seemed to be violating some of the Old Covenant Scriptures. The reports of Jews and Gentiles converted to Christ who were then living in the same communities of faith were very dramatic and controversial. Some Judaizers from the Jerusalem church go to Antioch and teach that all who believe on the Messiah must be circumcised in order to be saved.

The leaders of the Jerusalem church convene to consider these issues. The reports included reports of God doing mighty works among the Gentiles. Peter testifies that God is bringing Gentiles to himself through grace just as he is bringing the Jews to God through grace (Acts 15). Paul and Barnabas also testify as to the Holy Spirit coming on the Gentile converts, giving them faith in the Messiah and a new life. They quote Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 45:21 to support their contention that the holy remnant of Jews and Gentiles were anticipated by the prophets in the last days. They argue that circumcision should not be required for salvation.

The council agrees and sends a letter to that effect. In order to reach such conclusions, the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church hear the testimony as to what God is doing in Christ’s name, pray in the Spirit, and reread their Scriptures.

“Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: “After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name,” says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages” (Acts 15:14-18).

### **FAITHFUL TO THE PAST**

The book of Acts continues to deal with the tension of how the new community relates to the Old Covenant promises and prophets. Great respect is given to the past as there should be, but the new work of God is not cancelled.

Through the Spirit’s leading, the disciples eventually conclude that the Scriptures had witnessed to a day in which the gospel would go to the nations, and the nations would come into the people of God. They are walking out the truth that the Lord has sent the Messiah. A new age has dawned. The past is seen as promise, and the events in Acts are fulfillment. There is tension,

but there is still faithfulness to the past. The redemptive purposes of God are creating a new world (see Acts 11, 15).

### **OUT OF THE JEWISH CRADLE**

The gospel is now being declared to the Jews and the nations “apart from the law and the prophets, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it.” The kingdom gospel has moved from its Jewish cradle in Jerusalem and is walking through the Roman Empire. This is fulfillment in the fullness of time. The world is being changed. Jesus is the Emperor of the world. Yet he is also the beloved Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and pours out the Spirit on all who call on his name. Time is always pregnant with the fruitfulness of God in us until he comes to “restore all things.”

Yet the kingdom is always contested, then and now. Paul is beaten repeatedly within an inch of his life. Some in the new communities malign him, but he continues announcing the kingdom and nurturing churches that arise from preaching the good news. The good news of God’s rule is forever liberated from Judaism to be preached and lived out in the known world.

### **PAUL -- MINISTER OF THE FULL GOSPEL**

At one point, Peter is under pressure from the Judaizing teachers who have come from Jerusalem to Galatia, and refuses to eat with his Gentile brothers and sisters. Paul cites his rebuke of Peter in his letter to the Galatians. He reports telling Peter, “You are not walking in line with the truth of the gospel.”

It is one thing for the Spirit to come on an isolated Samaritan or Roman soldier, but the gospel of the kingdom of God reconciles us into new communities under Christ the Lord (see Ephesians 2 and 3). This is the promise of Abraham exploding into the world. The nations are coming to the Lord and are living in peace with the Jewish believers.

This is the very opposite of the sectarian mind. Jesus has come to bring all of Israel together, but then he intends to use the newly gathered Israel to bless the nations. So the vision is very large; all of what was formerly Israel and the nations come together in the true Israel, those who have the “faith of Abraham.”

Until the Lord God uses Paul to preach and plant churches, the blessing of the Jews and the nations together is not happening. Paul is the unique bridge-builder between the gospel’s Jewish roots and the entire Roman world. The unique ministry he brings to the world is the full hospitality of the nations and the Jews within the Messiah’s new communities. Paul is the human partners working in concert with the truth of the gospel.

### **COLLECTION -- A UNITY DECLARATION**

Paul respects his Jewish heritage by preaching first in the synagogue and then to the Gentiles in every city. Yet he preaches a gospel of the kingdom that is far bigger than Jerusalem,

the law, or Israel. His mission to the nation's cities, where he preaches to the Jews first and then to the nations, is the subject of the last 15 chapters of Acts.

Toward the end of Acts, Paul goes back to Jerusalem with the collection gathered up by the Gentile churches on behalf of the Jerusalem church. This is not only famine relief; it is a declaration of unity with the Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a symbol of Paul's great love for his Jewish brothers and sisters and his passion to live at peace with them "in the Messiah."

Yet on this trip back to Jerusalem Paul is arrested amid Jewish protesters, and appeals his arrest to the Roman authorities. He travels all the way to Rome and is announcing the kingdom rule of God all the way. Acts ends with Paul, under house arrest in Rome, boldly preaching the good news.

### **ACTS AND THE ABRAHAMIC PROMISE**

In his two-part volume of Luke and Acts, Luke has reported the stunning news of the spread of the gospel to the known world, all the way to the seat of Gentile power and authority. The promises of God to Abraham ring in his ears. He senses the joy of participating in the "turn of the ages." It is not a literary failure that Luke would end the book of Acts so abruptly. For Acts is not about Paul or Peter or any other human; it is about the Spirit working through willing instruments to break out the good news of the loving Creator God to the whole world.

What is unmistakably clear at the end of Acts is this: God has acted to reestablish his wise sovereignty over the whole creation, which would mean a great act of healing and rescue. He did not want to rescue humans from the creation any more than he wanted to rescue Israel from the Gentiles. He wanted to rescue Israel so that Israel might be a light to the Gentiles, and he wanted to rescue humans in order that humans might be his stewards over creation.

The churches of the Messiah's gospel continue to thrive during the years after Paul's death in the mid-60s. Other letters, including Hebrews, James, Peter's two epistles, John's letters, and finally the book of Revelation in 95 A.D., witness to the same vision. Peter and Paul are martyred in Rome. Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70 after a four-year war. Thus ends the era of second-temple Judaism. The members of the Messiah's churches flee to Pella from Jerusalem, refusing to join in the rebellion.

The New Testament writers do not mention the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus had prophesied such, and the four Gospels, written from the early 60s to the 90s, clearly set out Jesus' judgment on Jerusalem and his understanding of his resurrected body as the new temple of God on the earth.

### **THE STORY IS UNFINISHED**

As did the early disciples within Luke-Acts we find ourselves together as disciples of Jesus Christ in an unfinished Story. We acknowledge that the Story is very old; we do this by acknowledging the authority of the first testament Scriptures. The Story predates the coming of

Jesus to this earth in 4 B.C. Yet we also acknowledge that this Story has not finished. We are a part of this ongoing missional Story of the people of God! We await the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to complete, perfect, and transform all things. We live in hope regarding the coming of the Lord. We are to reflect together publicly what and who is coming.

## **CHAPTER 24: THE PREDOMINATING VISION OF THE NEW COMMUNITIES**

The church is called to take on Israel's true servant destiny and become the missionary people of the kingdom of God. And that mission is a victorious calling won in the battle of the Cross. The issue is not in doubt. The kingdom of God moves on to its inevitable triumph, the unconditional surrender of the foe, the restoration of all creation under the divine domain (Acts 3:21), and the submission of all powers in heaven and on earth to the name of Christ (Philippians 2:10, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, Isaiah 45:23). Paul is driven by the final vision when Christ brings unity to all things." At that moment, "Every knee will bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord."

### **ROMANS, PHILEMON AND THE GREAT STORY**

Paul's letter to Rome, as well as his letter to Philemon, a slave owner at Colossae, show the dramatic changes wrought by the coming, the continuing rule and the expected appearance of Jesus Christ the Lord. Romans describes the new foundations for human community and Philemon draws out the stunning social implications of living "in the Messiah." It is true in both instances that, "If anyone is in Christ he is living in a new world."

### **ROME -- A NEW COMMUNITY**

Paul writes what is among the most influential letters ever written from Corinth to Rome in A.D. 57. In it, he retells the Great Story and places the Jews and the nations in that Story together in the Messiah as members of one another, the reconstituted people of God.

As a missionary pastor, Paul retells the Story to the church at Rome because of the developing tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman house churches. They were at odds regarding Gentile adherence to the Jewish law, especially over the means of Jewish identity in the diaspora: circumcision (2:25-3:1; 4:9-12), Sabbath observance, and food laws (14:1-23).

What is at stake practically is whether Gentiles must observe the Jewish law on these points. The very unity of the body of Christ is on the line. What is at stake theologically is the gospel itself -- whether "God's righteousness" comes by way of "doing" the law or by faith in Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. Paul says the work of God is being threatened by disputes over "eating and drinking."

Disciples of Jesus, Jewish and Gentile, are coming together to form new communities within local house churches in response to the apostolic preaching of the Story of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, Savior and Lord of the world. This was a stunning turn of events.

The promises of God in Genesis 12 are foundational to Paul's retelling of the True Story in 57 A.D.

## **ROMANS -- UNITY OF JEWS AND THE NATIONS IN THE MESSIAH**

Paul's letter to Romans gives the foundations for the unity of this newly constituted and struggling people of God. Jews and Gentiles alike are enslaved to sin and the power of separation in the world. This is no less than catastrophic. The conclusion for everybody is simply: "Let every mouth be stopped and the whole world held accountable to God"(3:19). So the Jews and the nations begin with the same diagnosis: All need salvation.

Yet "we are all justified freely by his grace through the redemption, the liberation with a price, that came by Jesus Christ" (3:24). When we were enemies of God we were reconciled -- made friends again to him -- through the death of his Son. This justification (declaring us not guilty), redemption (liberation from bondage), and reconciliation (becoming friends again) has saved all of us, Jew and Gentile alike.

## **THE UNDYING VISION OF THE GREAT STORY**

The great Old Testament hope that the nations would come to be part of Israel is being fulfilled in Christ. The continuity of the promises made to Abraham and the faith of Abraham hold the hiStory of Israel and the church of Jesus Christ together as one continuous Story that has reached its fulfillment: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those of the law but to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed -- the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not" (Romans 4:16-17).

The water baptism of Jews and that of the nations signifies a death to sin and new life in Christ for all who come to Christ. All come out of their tragic little stories, Jew and Gentile, to live within the True Story, "in the Messiah." All those in Christ are to live a righteous life within their redeemed bodies (Romans 6:8-14).

All of us, not just the Gentiles, are saved the same way: by grace through faith. Yet Paul in no way considers the law unnecessary in the great Story. He considers the era of the law to have been crucial for the working out of the purposes of God in the world; a good, valuable, instructive guide; a mentor or tutor leading us to Christ. Now that the Messiah has come, the law no longer serves as a way of identifying the people of God or of establishing one's relationship with God.

Though the law is good, it cannot liberate the Jews or the nations from sin (Romans 7). The futility of a human trying to fulfill the law, doing what we do not want to do and never doing what we know to be the right thing, leads to a despair that Paul expresses at the end of chapter 7: “Wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from this body of death. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (7:24-25).

All of us previously condemned by sin, according to chapter 3, are now alive together in Christ. Paul declares, “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death” (8:1-2). All of us, Jews and the nations, are given life in the Spirit.

The Spirit of God is the end of the law because the Spirit in us fulfills the righteous commandment of the law (Romans 8:4). Jesus fulfills the purpose of the Old Testament Scriptures, which were unable to form a missional people because the people were weakened by the power of sin. The Spirit and the power to do the truth now lives in our otherwise dead bodies.

Through the Spirit, God establishes believers, Jews and the nations, as an end times people who live by the power of the future in the present, even as they await the consummation (8:9-21). We live now between the times; the future already has begun, but it has not yet been fulfilled.

Therefore, we now groan with the birth pangs of hope, longing for the redemption of our bodies and longing with all creation for liberation from this body of sin and death (8:22-25). The kingdom has come, but the kingdom is coming in victorious, all-consuming glory and power to resurrect the creation. So we live in the power of memory and hope. The Creator has not given up on his creation.

As Paul writes in Romans, he describes an amazing work of God that far surpasses anything that had appeared earlier in the Story. Because of this unprecedented work of God in the Messiah, Paul can conclude at the end of the letter, “Do not allow your disputes to destroy the work of God.”

## **THE TRAGEDY AND THE GLORY OF ROMANS 9-11**

The course of salvation hiStory should have been such that an Israel believing in Christ would have brought about the salvation of the nations. That’s the way the Old Testament Scriptures envision it. But the reality was different. Romans tells us that apart from a holy remnant (11:1-7), the majority of Israel took offense at its Messiah (9:32-33) and did not believe the gospel (11:20). Yet this failure did not end Israel’s mediation of salvation. When it did not mediate salvation to the nations through its faith, it did so through its unbelief. The gathering of Israel yielded to the mission to the Gentiles. Missionaries to Israel became missionaries to the nations, and through the failure of Israel salvation came to the nations (11:11). God does not let his plan be frustrated by human beings. The Gentiles are grafted onto the olive tree of Israel (11:17).

But God does not think only of the Gentiles. He granted salvation to the nations not for their sake alone, but also to make Israel jealous (10:19). Paul is deeply convinced that God’s

strategy with his people will prove successful. As soon as Messianic salvation among the nations achieves the “critical mass” known only to God, all believing Israel will be saved (11:26); Israel will finally be able to believe in Jesus as the Messiah because of the messianic attraction of the Gentile church.

### **GETTING THE STORY RIGHT -- ALL BELONG**

Paul agonizes over Israel’s rejection of the gospel of her Messiah in Romans 9-11. He speaks of the Gentiles being grafted in and anticipates a harvesting of believing Jews at the end. He does not write off the Jews and he does not give the Gentiles a place of honor over the Jews. He still expects God to bring believing Israel to Jesus. In a very tightly argued section of Romans, Paul explains that God has not been unfaithful to his promises to Israel. Israel is still within the purposes of God. The nations in Christ do not stand over their Jewish brothers in Christ. In the very next chapter he declares, “Each member belongs to all the others” (12:5).

The issue is the existence of the Jews and Gentiles together in Christ as the true Israel. As vigorous communities of the Messiah flourish, those outside will be drawn in by the obvious blessing enjoyed by the believing communities.

### **THE WORSHIP EXPLOSION**

Worship explodes into the street because Jesus has opened up the Holy of Holies for our access night and day forever (see Hebrews 8, 9). We glorify God in our bodies night and day. (Romans 12:1-4). “Worship begins when we are born again and never ends.” The sense of the presence of God and the will of God permeates the ordinary. Worship is not a guilt offering offered in the Jerusalem temple by Jews but night-and-day thank offerings offered up by all who call on the name of the Lord.

If Jewish and Gentile Christians are all children of Abraham, fellow worshippers of the living God, then they all “belong to all the others,” united as one “in Christ.” Paul is declaring that the two streams, the Jews and the nations, are now one new stream, the body of Christ. The work of God creates a new people of God. “So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (12:5). Now the Jews and the nations together are members of the body of Christ, one new humanity, members one of another, a new temple in the Lord, the household of God, and the family of God. The metaphors roll on in Paul’s letters because the vision lives in Paul as a staggeringly beautiful gift from the Lord God!

### **GIFTED FULL-TIME MINISTERS**

Romans 12:6 tells us that, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.” The Spirit in contrast to Acts 3 of the Story is equipping all members of the body, not just a few prophets, priests or kings to do the work of ministry. So each member -- male and female, slave

and free, Jew and Gentile -- is gifted to minister for the common good. All are full-time ministers. The Spirit gives gifts to be used for the body's sake. The word translated "one another" best describes the action of the Spirit through the members of the body to build up the church: "welcome one another, build up one another, admonish one another, forgive one another, and bear with one another." The entire church is urged to do the one-anothers. The entire church is empowered and mobilized to build up the Messianic community into the image of Christ.

The church exists to bless the world. Paul is planting these new Messianic communities everywhere he preaches.

In Romans, Paul calls for "sincere love," telling us to "bless the persecutor" and "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:9-21). The church is the body of the One who did not return evil for evil, who shed his blood for his enemies rather than shed the blood of his enemies. The church is shaped by the Holy War Jesus fought, not the Holy Wars the Judges fought. The church responds to her enemies with love and spiritual warfare, not with guns! Because the church does not exist for itself, but completely and exclusively for the world, it is necessary that the church not become the world but that it retain its own countenance.

## **NEW POLITICS**

In chapter 13, Paul does not call for the overthrow of Rome through armed revolt; rather Paul sees the role of civil authorities and the law as divine institutions. They are both provisional structures that will cease on the last day. Yet in this time between the times, the disciples are to be subject to the higher powers as God's ordained servants of justice, designed to "execute wrath on the evil doer." Civil authority is given provisional authority under God, but is not given the authority to command absolute allegiance.

Paul already worships King Jesus who is now reigning as Lord of the universe. Therefore in his mind, the Jewish passion for the overthrow of the Roman authorities in Judea and the Messiah's assumption of the throne misses the point. Jesus already rules and reigns as Christ the Lord over Rome. Jesus has already done it!

## **LOVE AND LAW**

Paul sees the law as minimum morality. He sees love not as substituting for law but summarizing the law. "The commandments, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, and whatever other commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to the neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (13:9-10).

## **UNDERSTANDING THE TIME**

Yet for the disciple, moral reasoning now emanates from the reigning, crucified Lord and their vision of the day of the Lord's coming. Christ is always the goal, the completion, the final vision.

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

-- Romans 13:11-14 (see also 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Ephesians 5:14)

Everything here is predicated on "understanding the time." The kairos -- the pregnant moment -- has come. The time is here to wake up, our salvation is nearer than it was, and the night has nearly given way to the day. Our calling is to behave in the continuing night as if the day has dawned, to enjoy the "now" of the kingdom rule of God in the certain knowledge that what is still "not yet" is coming. Clothing ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ awakens us to flee slavish sensuality, bodily wastefulness and divisive pettiness. The Light calls us on to live as children of light.

The embodied life, personally and corporately, now reflects the redemptive movement of the Story from the age of Moses to Jesus, to life in the Spirit and the consummation of all things in the Messiah. We have been called since Pentecost to "understand the time." It is critical that we live out the True Story of the world, but it is also vitally important that we discern "the time," the unique, unprecedented moment of the True Story in which we are now living (13:11-14).

## **DO NOT TEAR UP THE WORK OF GOD**

Romans 14 and 15 emphatically declare that the unity of the church must not be destroyed by differences over Jewish food laws. The unity of the body is a kingdom treasure, God's means of announcing the good news of the kingdom. So the admonition is "find a way to work this out without dividing" and "do not tear up the work of God." The food laws, whether observed or not, must not loom larger than the new community that the believer in Christ now lives in. Jesus is gathering us up, and this means we bring into this gathering our differences and our diversities in Christ and they are swallowed by our unity!

Paul is declaring that Jesus has advanced the kingdom to such a stage that the food laws and the commandments that bound them on the people of God have served their usefulness but are no longer the command of the Lord in the newly constituted people of God.

## UNITY RANKS ABOVE BEING RIGHT ABOUT FOOD LAWS

It is astounding that Paul said, “The kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking but righteousness joy and peace in the Holy Spirit.” The notion that eating and drinking, referring to the Jewish food laws, is not a kingdom requirement dramatically breaks with those who considered Leviticus the commandment of the Lord for the church. Paul is declaring a sea change in the way the Old Testament Scriptures are understood in the church.

Yet Paul counsels abstention from those foods prohibited under the law, not as a matter of keeping the law but as an act of freedom on behalf of the unity of the people of God. Paul considers the embodied unity of the people of God as the primary sign of the kingdom coming in Jesus. Our freedom must serve the unity that Christ gives.

The church is the sign to the principalities and the powers of the multidimensional wisdom of God revealed in the Messiah. The church embodies the truth in real communities at real addresses, which makes plain the eternal purpose of God to bring all people together into one new humanity in the Messiah (Ephesians 3:10). Division over “eating and drinking” would destroy the church’s witness to the eternal purposes of God.

At the close of this section of Romans 15:5-13, Paul casts a vision so big and so foundational that agreement on food laws pales in significance. Our small, divided, sectarian minds have trouble imagining such. “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written ...”

Paul then quotes several Old Testament passages that anticipate the Gentiles praising God in community with the Jews. “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name” (II Samuel 22:50, Psalms 18:49). Again it says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people” (Deuteronomy 32:43). And again, “Praise, the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him all you peoples” (Psalm 117:1). Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; The Gentiles will hope in Him” (Isaiah 11:10).

Jews and Gentiles together in Christ, justified by grace through faith and alive in the Spirit, witness to the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that through Israel’s seed the nations would be blessed. Paul then quotes numerous Old Testament texts that anticipate the Gentiles praising the Lord in the new community. Therefore, division over the food laws dishonors the promise of the Lord to Abraham and the prophetic visions of several prophets. For Paul, division over the food laws obscures and even hides the significance of the reconciling work of God in Christ for the whole world. Unity together preserves the church’s witness to Christ’s work and embodies the blessing of Abraham in the world!

## **WOMEN IN THE GREAT STORY**

At the end of Paul's letter to Rome, his references to women points to a dramatic change in their role in the True Story of the world. Following the lead of Jesus, Paul cites women who are laboring missionaries of the gospel. He also calls Priscilla and Aquila collaborators (16:3), and he usually names Priscilla ahead of Aquila, which implies the special importance of this woman for the Christian mission. Andronicus and Junia (a female) are referred to in 16:7 as "respected among the apostles." They apparently belonged to a larger group of apostles, ones sent with authority by the Lord Jesus Christ.

These references to women as prophets, ministers, missionaries and apostles are totally consistent with the prophetic promise of Joel 2 that "your sons and daughters shall prophesy." Within the Corinthian house church, women were praying and prophesying and were not told to be quiet but to wear a head covering (1 Corinthians 11:1-10).

The two passages which restrict women in the New Testament are addressed either to false teachers in Timothy or to some unknown abuse in Corinth. The isolated prohibitions are not addressed to all the churches of the end times, but are rather correctives of local abuses. The church must pray so as to distinguish the normative vision from the corrective. These two passages written to correct specific abuses must not be seen as controlling over the normative vision of Acts 2, "Your sons and daughter shall prophesy," and Galatians 3:28, "There is neither male nor female, you are all one in Christ."

The liberation of women from domination to become co-heirs, co-workers and one in Christ, fully gifted by the Spirit, evidences the redemptive movement of the Story and establishes a kingdom trajectory for women, encouraging them to use their gifts and fruits for the common good. It is about the work of the Spirit; it is not about gender!

## **REDEMPTION AT REAL ADDRESSES**

The significance of the house churches must not be underestimated. In them, the sociological and ethnic barriers between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slave and free, high and low, educated and uneducated -- all quite important in the Roman world -- were broken by and in favor of the new binding of all Christians to Christ as the Lord (Galatians 3:27, I Corinthians 1:26-28, 12:12-13).

The house churches, such as existed at Rome, were the one body community of the redeemed growing up around the Lord's Supper. Where this succeeded, it was possible to speak of a new creation, the anticipatory sign of the new world of God and of the reality of a new life (Romans 6:4; Galatians 6:15).

The life of the real local church must witness to the new creation. It is for this purpose the church exists. She is the witness to the kingdom of God on this earth.

## **CHAPTER 26: ACT 6 – THE CHURCH AND END-TIMES HOPE**

We now have sketches, clues and some photographs of the coming sixth act of the divine drama. The details are not spelled out in Scripture, but the general contours are. We are called to live in the power of this future and to be shaped by it. The vision of the “not yet” realized kingdom is instilled in us by the Spirit of God. The visions, values and power of the future call us onward and upward.

### **THE POWER OF THE FUTURE**

The church in the power of the Spirit anticipates the sixth and consummating act: of Jesus Christ the Lord coming to set all things right and bring heaven to earth. Then comes the final curtain of the unfinished drama of Scripture. The church from the very beginning has lived in anticipation of the coming sixth act of the great Story. The church in the power of the Spirit is empowered, energized and lives in the power of the future. The last things literally become the first things. The last things are going to be the things that last.

From Thessalonians, written in about 49 A.D., to the Apocalypse of John in about 95 A.D., the writers of the new covenant Scriptures call the church to live in the power of the future, between the now of the kingdom coming today and Christ appearing in consuming glory to judge and renew the entire planet. The end times were not an afterthought. They were the first thought.

**D political chaos in Germany.**

### **CORINTH -- THE CHALLENGE OF LIVING THE SHAPE OF GOD’S FUTURE**

In 53 or 54 A.D., Paul writes a pastoral letter to the church in Corinth in which he stands against the church on issue after issue that are betrayals of the gospel of Christ and life in the Spirit. Within this letter the crucified Christ is exalted above all others.

Running throughout this letter is a powerful, consistent call to live now in the power and shape of God’s present and future kingdom. The coming of the Lord and the future Jesus brings will shape the life of the Corinthian church.

### **THE ANTICIPATION**

In I Corinthians 1:7 Paul declares, “You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly await our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul refers to the revealing of the Lord Jesus as the resurrected and reigning Lord Jesus the Christ. The coming of the Lord will be an unveiling of the one who is among us now. Until then the church will be gifted with the gifts necessary to live a life of human flourishing and mutual building up in Christ.

## **THE STORY CARRIED FORWARD**

Jesus is referred to here as the Christ, the Messiah, the one Israel had hoped for. The end-times anticipation of the Lord Jesus coming to consummate the kingdom of God carries forward Israel's hope of the kingdom coming in glory to this world. The kingdom is here and now, but it is there and then as well. The presence of the kingdom now gives us strength as we minister in the Spirit in anticipation of the completion of the True Story of the world at the coming of the Lord.

This conviction of an incomplete Story permeates the early church. Something of indescribable significance has happened: the kingdom has come! Yet the Story is not over. What began in Genesis has moved to a new time, but it has not exhausted the promises. Fulfillment has come in part, but is awaited "eagerly" because of the partial fulfillment that has come with the life of the Spirit. So it is this energizing anticipation that Paul highlights at the outset of this pastoral letter.

## **PURIFYING JUDGMENT**

Ministering to a carnal and divided church, Paul describes in chapter 3 the judgment of Christ that will be administered on the immature Christians engaged in quarreling and jealousy. "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives he will receive his reward. If it is burned up he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved but only as one escaping through the flames." So if jealousy and quarreling will be burned up in the judgment at the end, then it has no place in today's church. This is Paul's argument. The judgment here is purifying, not condemning.

## **THE JUDGMENT WILL EQUIP US**

The vision of I Corinthians 3 of a purifying judgment, in which the sins of jealousy and quarreling of this age will be destroyed at the judgment, equips believers for the work they are called to do in the kingdom of God in this life and at the Lord's appearance. For chapters 6:1-11 describes our future work as judges or administrators under Christ in the age to come. Such work cannot be done by those full of quarreling and jealousy. Paul uses destiny and Story to call out and develop character!

Both chapters 3 and 6 strongly suggest continuity between this life and the next. We are being equipped now for what is to come. We live now as those who see and know the shape of the future. We live as those who will be working under Christ in the age to come. The virtues or fruits necessary to do work of the King in the next life are to be embodied and matured in this life (Matthew 5:5). We will experience purifying judgments as well as rewards for obedience. This is not salvation by works; salvation is always an act of grace. Any reward is an act of grace.

This warning of purifying judgments and promise of rewards is a call to prepare ourselves for life in the age to come. We are preparing for the ministries of the age to come that are at work in the Lord's kingdom now!

The judgment of God will not only set all things right but will purify the church as she enters into the glorious kingdom of God at the coming of the Lord. The last things are now first. Nothing escapes the presence of the One who is increasingly all in all.

### **NO LAWSUITS -- KEEP THE PEACE**

In chapter 6 we are told, "If any of you have a dispute with another dare he take it before the ungodly instead of before the saints. Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life? ... The very fact that you have lawsuits among yourselves means you have been completely defeated already" (6: 1-3, 7).

This prohibition against suing fellow Christians is a powerful but often ignored example of moral formation shaped by the future. If we are to be ministers and administrators of justice and peace in the coming kingdom of God, as also described in Revelation 21-22, then litigating against one another in pagan courts in this life obliterates our witness to Who and what is coming, and fails to prepare us for our future work in the new order. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in little will be given more to do." Are we listening?

The Story, yet to be completed but anticipated as coming to completion because of the incarnation of God in Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world, shapes the present. If Christ has come to redeem and reconcile, he will surely come to complete the work!

### **ARE WE READY TO BE CHEATED?**

Today admonitions such as I Corinthians 6:1-9 are summarily dismissed by many who, strangely enough, are very interested in speculating as to when Christ is coming. We speculate that Christ may come in our generation while ignoring the obvious authority of the Lord in our decision-making in today's church! The end times has more obvious day-to-day significance than we care to acknowledge! Are we ready to be cheated or to be wronged in order to witness to the coming kingdom? If not, are we living the vision of the future rule of God? Speculating about the end times is frivolous nonsense. The end times are here! What are we doing in response to this news?

### **SINGLES AND MARRIAGE IN THE END TIMES**

In chapter 7 of I Corinthians Paul re-envisioned marriage as Jesus did, according to the kingdom come. Paul declares that because of the time "being short" it is better not to marry.

Paul's sense of the kingdom already come and coming in glory, and the urgent ministry such things imposes on us now reprioritizes marriage.

For the first time in all of Scripture the single woman or man is described as complete or whole. The Old Testament did not have a word for bachelor. Because of the kingdom come and coming, day-to-day reality has changed. This is end-times teaching of such clear practical significance that it boggles the mind. In Christ in the end times, singleness is wholeness! Paul declares this to be true without in any way disparaging marriage.

Later in the chapter, after 28 verses in which he discusses marriage and sexual issues, Paul concludes, "What I mean brothers is the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn as if they did not; those who are happy as if they were not; those who buy something as if it was not theirs to keep; those who use the things of this world as if they were not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (29-31).

### **OUR GRIP IS TOO TIGHT**

This passage sounds very strange because it is profoundly immersed in the end times, and we typically do not teach or preach or live as end-times people. Our grip is too tight. It means too much when we are happy and it means too much when we are not. English poet William Wordsworth lamented the grip of the secular world. His words were prophetic:

The world is too much with us, late and soon  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not.

### **MEAL-EATING UNTIL HE COMES**

On the night Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper it was envisioned as an anticipation of the Messianic Banquet. He spoke of one day in the future eating the Supper with his disciples in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:18). Within that scene he says to his disciples, "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in the kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

This kingdom meal, instituted by Jesus, the supreme sacrament of the Lord's coming, anticipates "our meeting and communing with him at his table in the kingdom." Within a lengthy discussion of the eating practices of the church at the table of the Lord, Paul judges in I Corinthians 11 their insensitive, divisive ways of eating the Supper and then reminds them, "Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (vs. 26). The Supper is not the private meal of a dead Savior but the communal meal of a risen

and coming Savior and Lord. The Supper is to proclaim the love of God as it is coming in the person of Jesus.

We are to eat the Supper in a loving manner, waiting on one another, thereby proclaiming his death in word and deed, until we eat the Messianic banquet anew with him in his glorious kingdom. Christ's death is not the end, but the beginning of the end. By these words, "until he comes," Paul sets the Supper between the memory of Christ's Cross and the hope of Christ's coming and the great fellowship of the Messianic banquet. We witness to and live in anticipation of Christ's coming and his Messianic banquet by eating the Supper together in a way that honors Jesus and every last member of His body.

All of this is a sign of Christ and his power in us, making one of us where there had always been two. This covenant meal is not only a memorial but participation as covenant people in the peacemaking presence of Christ in the world. This is the witness of the local church until he comes to fill all in all with his glory and unity. The anticipation of the Messianic banquet shapes the Lord's Supper as a meal for pilgrims awaiting their coming King.

### **LOVE IS OUR DESTINY -- THE GIFTS WITHIN THE STORY**

In a context of division and conflict over spiritual gifts in the life of the church, Paul situates the gifts within the unfolding epic narrative of God's redemption of the world (chapter 13). The gifts of the Spirit are to be used for the common good, but when the perfect is come, when we shall see face-to-face, then the gifts of this age will vanish.

The gifts are to be understood as part of God's redemptive Story of the world. We understand the place of the gifts inside the True Story of the world. None of the gifts will survive the perfect, the goal, our destiny! This present life is the first phase in a much longer existence. Between the present and the ultimate future there will be strong continuity as well as some radical discontinuity. Tongues, prophecy, and gifts of knowledge will be made redundant as candles are made redundant by the sunrise.

### **FROM PARTIAL TO COMPLETENESS**

It will be like the great transformation from childhood to adulthood: a transition from peering into a smoky mirror to seeing someone face to face. Paul has already said, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I am nothing." He goes on to say that love abides. Love is the language they speak in God's world and we would do well to learn it. Love is our destiny, not just our duty.

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes the imperfect disappears. ... Now we see as a poor reflection in a mirror. Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully just as I am fully known. Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love" (13:9-10, 12-13).

Anticipation of the ultimate destiny of the new heaven and new earth through the Spirit-led, habit-forming practice of faith, hope and love shapes and sustains the body of Christ as she

lives to reflect his glory in her common life. The destiny reveals to us love as the dominant fruit of the Spirit in the end times, and thereby gives us the understanding that apart from the virtue of loving, we will never use the charisms for the purposes of God in the church.

Nobody has arrived. Nobody now sees 20-20. This should bring us down off our spiritual pedestals. Nobody has the authority to tear up the church by using God's gifts in ways that damage or destroy God's end-times purposes in a local church. What abides now is "faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." If we live expectantly of the complete and the perfect -- Jesus the Lord -- then love and her fruits will abide now, as it will in the age to come.

The vision of the One coming and the nature of his kingdom shapes the way the church conducts her own assemblies. The end is everything. Destiny is central to the Great Story that the Bible tells. It is not an addendum or an afterthought. It is the primary vision. It shapes the life of today's church.

### **SELF-CENTEREDNESS**

Contrasted with the love destiny of Corinthians 13-15, there is a temptation toward salvation self-centeredness. We privatize the faith so that the whole cosmic drama of salvation culminates in the words "for me, for me."<sup>143</sup>

The question of what happens to me after death, for instance, is not the central framing question that centuries of theological tradition have supposed. The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots regularly insists that the central framing question is that of God's purpose of rescue and re-creation of the whole world, the entire cosmos.

The destiny of individual human beings must be understood within that context: We are only part of a much larger picture and the whole point of being saved now is so that we can play a vital role in kingdom ministry. Paul speaks in the arresting terms of being "fellow workers with God" within that larger picture and purpose.<sup>144</sup>

### **RESURRECTION -- HIS AND OURS**

In the middle of a tremendous resurrection chapter, Paul declares the indispensable character of Christ's resurrection (chapter 15). He also declares the unbreakable connection between Christ's resurrection and ours, as well as the hopelessness of us all apart from the resurrected Christ.

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised for the dead, how can some of you say there is not resurrection from the dead? If there is no resurrection from the dead then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ is not raised then our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that we are found to be false witnesses about God for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep are

lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has been raised from the dead; the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (I Corinthians 15:12-20).

In I Corinthians 15, Paul describes the resurrection of the body as the transformation of bodies; there is continuity and discontinuity between the corrupted physical body of this age and the transformed body of the age to come. It is not the corrupted body that will inherit the kingdom of God, but the transformed physical body. Paul says if there is no resurrection of the dead, we are of all men most to be pitied. We are in fact dead in our sins.

There is no fallback hope. If there is no resurrection then we are hopeless. The resurrection is the power of the future presently living in our bodies. If the resurrection is not living in our bodies then we are dead. Resurrection redeems the created body. The one who resurrects created the world. The one who is the Resurrection and the Life is the Word through whom all things were made.

### **REDEMPTION, NOT DESTRUCTION OF THE CREATION**

Creation, catastrophic corruption of the creation, and redemption, not the destruction of the physical creation, go together as huge parts of a narrative that began in Genesis 1 and do not end till Revelation 22. The God who creates sent Jesus to redeem and then raised him from the dead. This is Paul’s vision of creation and new creation.

Chapter 15 goes on to declare the following: Christ is risen as the first fruits of the harvest. He rules now. He rules until all the powers and death itself are destroyed. We are then raised at his coming -- the harvest he guaranteed as the first fruit.

Though we physically die in this world, the shape of this hope transforms our lives in the present. The believers’ lives are bounded by the vision of the resurrection-ascension and the appearance of Christ to raise us to the same dimension of life in which he now lives. That will be the life of a resurrected body within a resurrected planet earth. The entire creation will be resurrected (Romans 8, I Corinthians 15).

### **NOTHING GOOD IN HIM WILL BE LOST**

Paul concludes in 15:58, “Therefore my dear brothers stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” The admonition is to live fully because absolutely nothing is empty or lost in death. No good work now is wasted effort or meaningless drudgery. The resurrection swallows death and its paralyzing power. The resurrection hope fills us with energy for doing the Lord’s will now in a world where people die.

In commenting on I Corinthians 15, N.T. Wright argues:

If evolutionary optimism is squelched by, among other things, the sober estimates of the scientists that the universe as we know it today is running out of steam and

cannot last forever, the Gospel of Jesus Christ announces that what God did for Jesus at Easter he will do not only for all those who are “in Christ” but also for the entire cosmos. It will be an act of new creation, parallel to and derived from the act of new creation when God raised Jesus from the dead.<sup>145</sup>

## **CHAPTER 29: IN THE END IS OUR BEGINNING**

Using visions unparalleled in Scripture, John ministers the inheritance of all disciples into their imaginations in Revelation 21-22. As C.S. Lewis said, “Reason is the organ of truth. Imagination is the organ of meaning.” It is meaning that feeds our souls. It is the meaning of life that gives us the heart to be an overcomer. Rationality alone cannot produce the passion of martyrs or lovers.

As John describes the final vision, he reverberates with the images of the entire Bible. John is in Isaiah 65:13-22 when he describes the New Jerusalem, and he also uses an anthology of Old Testament Scriptures (Isaiah 61:3, 10; Ezekiel 37:27; Hosea 2:23; Isaiah 8:8; Genesis 1,2). The New Jerusalem is all that the prophets anticipated and much more. The living past reverberates within chapters 21-22, but all the images and visions are transformed by the new creation the Lion Lamb brings to the world.

## **OVERVIEW OF REVELATION 21-22**

The dramatic trajectory of heaven is breathtaking to us. This is not about an isolated soul going to heaven. It is about the fullness of God coming here to transform the entire creation. Salvation is bigger than Creation and bigger than the Fall.

John sees a new heaven and a new earth, “for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.” He sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven dressed as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Heaven is about the fullness of God coming here to transform the entire Creation. For the first time, the throne of God will be here on earth.

There will be no more sea, which is synonymous with the forces of chaos. God will now dwell with humankind. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; death will be no more; God annihilates death and dries up our tears and mourning. The one on the throne declares he is making “all things new.” The one on the throne describes himself as the “alpha and the omega.” He is the one who gives the water of life to the thirsty.

Interspersed within these two chapters are direct promises to the seven churches that “those who overcome will inherit all this.” The visions are designed to fire the believing imagination as to what is real, what the real Story is, and what they must do to overcome.

The entire known earth becomes a glorious Holy of Holies as the New Jerusalem, created by the unmediated presence of God, recreates a fallen world.

The river of life flows from the throne of God feeding and healing the nations. The consuming presence of God fills the earth with light. All that was lost in Eden is restored -- and more!

The last 12 verses of the book contain strong admonitions to “wash their robes, to not add one word to these words.” Nothing must be added to or subtracted from this call to discipleship so as to dilute the message.

### **THE NEW JERUSALEM AS THE PRESENCE**

From the very beginning of the True Story of the world, the presence of God is the dominating theme. So it is only appropriate that at the end of the Story the presence dominates.

Before chapter 21, Revelation confines the presence of God to the one who sits on the throne in heaven. He is present on earth as the slaughtered lamb. He is present as the Spirit in the faithful witness of the Lamb’s followers who follow him to death. But while the beast rules the world and humanity in general refuses to give God glory, his evident presence and his glory, which is inseparable from his reign, is hidden, and appears only in heaven.

But when all evil is destroyed, God’s throne comes to the earth, and the One seated on the throne declares, “I am making everything new!”

At the end of the Story, the Scriptures reverberate with the beginning, when the tree of life returns to the center of this earth. Life, given by God and without limitations or interruptions, fills all things. The great themes of Genesis 1-2 never die; they live in Revelation 21-22. The Story is never lost. Sin has often arrested the telling of the Story, but the Lord God faithfully brings all things to their proper goal.

When the new Jerusalem comes down, the holiness of God fills the earth with divine splendor. “It needs neither sun nor moon nor lamp” for it has the divine glory (21:23, 22:5). Beauty is no longer spoiled by death and tragic corruption. The new creation, like the old, will have its own God-given beauty, but will be even more beautiful through its reflection of God’s own splendor.

The overwhelming splendor will be God being all in all. “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and he will be their God” (verse 3). All sorrow, suffering and death are banished forever (verse 4). Significantly this promise is directly linked with God’s presence (verse 3). By means of the beautiful image John has taken from Isaiah. God himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes (21:4).

### **SEEING GOD AND LIVING -- THE STORY ADVANCES DRAMATICALLY**

Nothing evokes God’s immediacy more than the words, “They shall see his face” (22:4). Previously, no man could see God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20-23; Judges 6:22-23). The deepest of all human aspirations will be realized only beyond this mortal life (Psalms 17:15; I Corinthians 13:12). All distance between the One who sits on the throne and the world over which he rules will disappear. The description of the Lord “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” resounds as we walk with and love God in astonishing intimacy!

As in Daniel, God's kingdom turns out to be quite unlike that of the beast's. It finds its fulfillment not in the subjection of God's servants to his rule, but in their reigning with him. The saints will not "lord it over" anyone; they will rule as servants under God's rule (22:5).

### **HEAVEN, NOT HEREAFTER**

As of 2011 the American popular culture is churning out movies and books about heaven or a hereafter. I recently saw the movie *Hereafter*. When I went to the box office window to buy our tickets I had forgotten the title of the movie, and asked the ticket counter attendant about "the movie about heaven." She replied, "No, it is not called *Heaven*. It is titled *Hereafter*." I was immediately aware of the difference. Hereafter and heaven are not the same thing. Heaven has the divine dimension. The hereafter is the isolated soul's dimension.

The movie was about disembodied life after death. It was about whether we have a spiritual existence after death. God was never mentioned. The movie reflects our culture's understandable interest in life after death and actually argues that there is something after this life. Yet it is a godless afterlife.

Mitch Albom's bestselling book *Five People You Meet in Heaven* never mentions God. It is all about us somehow going to a hereafter where there is no God, but where bodiless humans exist.

This cultural interest in an afterlife certainly gives us grounds to have good conversations of mutual interest. But Revelation's vision of The City coming here is not about us; it is about God! It is not about out-of-body experiences. It is about transformed bodies inside a transformed cosmos filled with the presence of the Creator-Redeemer. The center of the new heaven and new earth will be the presence of God!

### **THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE LORD, NOT RELIGION**

It is God and the Lamb who will have the last word, not the church. But we can say with confidence that whoever is "saved" to share in the life of the end-times kingdom is saved not through the "religious traditions of humankind" (including that which we call Christianity) but through the work within hiStory of "the Lord God almighty and the Lamb."<sup>154</sup>

### **THE NEW JERUSALEM AS PLACE**

From the beginning we are immersed in matter. At the Genesis beginning we are up to our ears in created matter, in all sorts of bodies-human, animal and otherwise. In Revelation we are re-immersed in materiality. Nothing takes place apart from these boundaries -- from geology to hiStory, from geography to weather, from incarnation to the Lord's Supper. All true spirituality is embodied at a specific place.

The surprise of heaven in Revelation 21 is that it comes down in the form of a city: “And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride for her husband.” The Bible describes brother-hating (Enoch), God-defying (Babel), and Christ-hating (Jerusalem) cities. Heaven is formed out of dirty streets, murderous alleys, adulterous bedrooms, corrupt courts, commercialized churches, murderous and self-righteous religion, and thieving Wall Street financiers. The biblical heaven of Revelation 21 is not a nice environment far-removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion and transformation of the city by the city.<sup>155</sup>

### **THE NEW JERUSALEM -- THE HOLY CITY**

In 21:9-14, an angel shows John the bride, the Lamb’s wife, and carries John away in the Spirit to show him the Holy City, the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. The metaphors bride, Lamb’s wife and New Jerusalem all point to the truth contained in the vision. This is a heavenly city. It is no more the actual city of Jerusalem than is Babylon the actual city of Babylon. Both are types.

The city shone with the glory of God manifested in precious stones. The beauty of this world (gold, precious stones, pearls, dazzling light) becomes the vehicle of expressing the beauty of the eternal city. Eternity is no odorless, colorless, tasteless void; it is in contrast to the dead and silent streets of Babylon, a living city of light and color.<sup>156</sup>

### **THE HOLY OF HOLIES -- THE KNOWN WORLD**

John describes in 21:15-17 the walls of the great city using Ezekiel’s imagery from chapters 40 and 41. But he goes beyond Ezekiel to describe the city in the shape of a cube -- the number of completeness of the elect. It is also the shape of the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 5:17, Isaiah 60:3, 19). The walls of the heavenly city cover the entire known world at that time. The entire earth is the Holy of Holies! There is no temple, because the Lord God and the Lamb are the temple. There is no sun or moon, because the Lord God and the Lamb are the light of it. The nations shall walk by the light of it. The glory dominates the new Jerusalem filling her with light (21:22-27).

### **ALL IS SACRED**

It is impossible to overstate the significance of such imagery to a people today who are confused by the sacred/secular dichotomy. We have no public sense of the glory of God. Our concern for public social morality and justice witnesses to our longing for Who is coming to fill the earth with his presence and justice!

## **THE GLORY AND HONOR OF THE NATIONS**

In the Apocalypse, God's attitude toward elements of our culture is ambivalent because they are presently tokens of human rebellion and objects of idolatrous trust. He warns his people to not be contaminated by them. But his hatred of their present uses will lead him to transform them into proper instruments of service.<sup>157</sup>

God will stand in judgment of all idolatrous and prideful attachments to military, technological and commercial might (18:10-20). He will destroy all those rebellious projects that glorify oppression, exploitation and the accumulation of possessions.<sup>158</sup> And yet there is much in all culture, sustained by the Lord's common graces, which will come into the City!

"The nations that walk by the city's light will also bring their splendor into it ... The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it" (21:24, 26). The implication is that anything that would give any city glory would now be transferred to the final great City. This vision reflects the vision of this earth as created, and despite its corruption, still possessing beauty and value. The common graces of God even now sustain and bless the entire earth. The Lord has never left himself without witness. "He shines in all that's fair."

## **THE PATTERNS AND PROCESSES OF CULTURE**

When Isaiah and the Apocalypse look to the fulfillment of God's promises they envision a community into which technological artifacts, political rulers and people from many nations are gathered. God intended from the beginning that human beings would fill the earth with the processes, patterns and products of cultural formation. This has in no way been canceled by human sin. God will redeem and restore that which is presently perverted and distorted by human disobedience to his will.

## **HEAVEN WILL BE A PLACE OF CULTURE BUILDING**

Ancient kings served as the primary authorities over the cultural lives of their nations. And when they stood against other nations, they were the representatives of their respective cultures. To assemble kings together, then, was to assemble their national cultures together. The king of a great nation could bear a far-reaching authority that is today divided among many different kinds of leaders: the captains of industry; the molders of public opinion in art, entertainment and sexuality; educational leaders' representatives of family interests; and so on. That is why Isaiah and John link the entrance of the kings into the city with the gathering of the wealth of the nations.<sup>159</sup>

The cultural achievements of hiStory will reappear on the new earth (Revelation 21:24-26). Humankind will be able to work and develop the creation, while now released from the burden of sin.<sup>160</sup> The vision is not one of us in heaven as disembodied creatures, strumming our

harps! Heaven is not going to be a place where nothing happens. It will be a place of culture-building.

### **PREPARING FOR SOME BIG-TIME CREATIVITY**

The Christian life is directed toward a city, a place in which God's redemptive purposes for his creation will be realized. If we wrongly think of the future life as disembodied existence in an ethereal realm, it is nearly impossible to think of our present state as a positive preparation for heavenly existence.

But if we think of the future life in terms of inhabiting a heavenly city, then we can look for patterns of continuity between our present lives and the life to come. The Bible encourages us to think in these terms. In the light of the resurrection, we are able to affirm every act of love and justice, every word of truth spoken in the face of lies, and every work of beauty in a world of ugliness. It is only in the light of the resurrection that we can dare to affirm that our hiStory has ultimate significance.<sup>161</sup>

This is not to say that we can build the Holy City here and now. The Holy City comes down out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:1-2). It is God's work in partnership with ours, God being the managing partner!

### **OPEN GATES -- DOORS UNLOCKED!**

The gates of the city will never be shut. We will have total access because there will be no danger from an enemy. Such peace and security is impossible for us to imagine, but John calls us to see it.

### **THE GARDEN CITY**

Chapter 22:1-5 is the climactic moment, not only of this book but of the entire Bible. John brings the present narrative to its proper conclusion by merging the glorious city of the preceding narrative with a recovery of a central theme from the beginning of the biblical narrative. He pictures the city itself as a restoration of the Garden of Eden. It begins with the river of the water of life streaming from the throne of God and concludes with endless eternal light and with the saints ruling and reigning forever.

The first chapter of the Bible describes God making the world; the last chapters describe how God remade the world. "The former things have passed away ... behold I make all things new." It concerns what Christ called the regeneration (Matthew 19:28), literally "the new genesis." The creation as it was and will be is an immense organism alive with the life of God, for the stream "flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb, and then through the middle of the street of the city."

## **EDEN RESTORED -- THE STORY EXPLODES WITH WONDER**

The tree of life was lost in Genesis 3: “He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever.” But now John states it is recovered. “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.” So the garden city comes down out of heaven -- the new Eden. As a place, the New Jerusalem is a paradise of the natural world in its ideal state, rescued from the destroyers of the earth, reconciled with humanity, filled with the presence of God, and mediating the blessings of the end to humanity.

“The leaves of the trees are for the healing of the nations.” The healing is to the nations, those entities historically at odds and often in warfare with one another. Here then is the ultimate imagery of the restored Eden, whose original curse was “enmity” between the man and the woman, and between the two of them and the snake. That enmity became the unfortunate legacy of humankind as the result of the fall. And this healing is made possible because no longer will there be any curse. All of this comes out of Genesis 2:9, Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14:8. The curse of Genesis 3 is gone! Salvation eradicates all sin and all evil from the creation restoring the entire creation to blessedness.

## **THE PLOT’S DILEMMA RESOLVED**

The plot’s dilemma, recounted in earlier acts of the Great Drama and never resolved in hiStory, are now resolved by this mighty act of the Creator God who brings all things to completion.

The throne of God and the Lamb fill the City with the divine presence. His servants will serve him and will reign forever and forever. They will see his face and live (see Exodus 19). His name will be on their foreheads (Number 6:22-24). There is no night, no darkness, no threat or danger; instead they will live by the light of the Lord God forever.

As the Holy City, the New Jerusalem fills the ideal of the ancient city, as the place where heaven and earth meet at the center of the earth, from which God rules his land and his people, to whose attraction the nations are drawn for enlightenment, and in which people live in ideal, God-centered community. As the Temple, it is the place of God’s immediate presence, where his worshippers see his presence. The fulfillment runs joyfully through these verses. Good is now running wild and in every direction! At last the frustrations are over!

## **THE LORD’S PRAYER ANSWERED**

Were we not commanded to pray, “Thy kingdom come one earth as it is in heaven. Thy will be done on earth as it is heaven”? This was always the prayer. This was the hope of the first covenant that is fulfilled and transformed by the coming of Jesus. It was never about us going away from the earth but heaven coming here. The final vision of Revelation 21-22 is the answer to the Lord’s Prayer.

Within the same collection of teachings in Matthew 5 Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” What can this possibly reference other than the coming kingdom of God on earth as it is heaven? In this world’s political order, the meek inherit nothing. Revelation declares that will change.

### **OLD TEMPLE PASSES AWAY**

The Apocalypse is full of allusions to old covenant Scriptures. The very notion of a city, Jerusalem, is there in the old covenant. Yet the actual physical Jerusalem is no longer in Jesus’ hopes for the future. Jesus had declared that the temple will be destroyed and “I will rebuild it in three days” (John 2:19). The temple he spoke of was his body. After he was raised his disciples recalled what he had said.

Jesus told his disciples to flee Jerusalem when the great conflict arose (Mark 13). He is clearly commanding them to not assist the Jews in their wars with Rome. They obey and flee the disastrous war that led finally to the siege of the city and its utter destruction, including the temple. The old temple is clearly passing away as the Great Drama moves into the end times.

The work of Christ as our atoning sacrifice and High Priest has made the old temple and the old Jerusalem obsolete (see Hebrews 7-9). The temple as a place of animal sacrifice and Levitical prayers on behalf of the people no longer exists. It belongs to an earlier act in the Great Drama.

### **PORTABLE TEMPLES**

The church, living in the Spirit, is now repeatedly referred to as living temples of the Lord (Ephesians 2:22, I Corinthians 3, 6). This metaphor describes each disciple as well as the corporate body. All are temples of the Lord -- the place of the divine dwelling on the earth; the place of the Holy of Holies. As temples, we now live as signs of Who and what is coming. Our life together as a temple in the Lord points to the time when the whole earth becomes a Holy of Holies, full of the consummate glory of God.

This also means we must live now in our physical bodies as children of light, not darkness. The place of the presence within our bodies calls us to live physically in response to the light. This is Paul’s theme in Ephesians 4 and John’s in Revelation 21-22. Even now in a world where “the darkness is deep,” the kingdom has come, and is advancing, ultimately to consume all darkness and death.

### **EARTH-STRADDLING HOLINESS**

The tiny Holy of Holies of the old Jerusalem temple has been replaced by an earth-straddling Holy of Holies that brilliantly illuminates the entire earth. The eternal garden city, filled with the glorious presence of God, is our final destination!

## **KINGDOM -- GOD'S PEOPLE IN GOD'S PLACE UNDER GOD'S RULE**

If the kingdom of God is “God’s people, under God’s rule, in God’s place” then the final vision is a vision of the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom is about the presence and the people, but it is also about place -- about land, matter and bodies. Everything is transformed.

## **THE LORD REDEEMS ALL -- SATAN LOSES ALL**

If God would have to annihilate the present cosmos, then Satan would have won a great victory. For then Satan would have succeeded in so devastatingly corrupting the present cosmos and the present earth that God could do nothing with it except destroy it. But Satan did not win such a victory. On the contrary, Satan has been decisively defeated. Therefore, the Scripture declares that present physical creation will be redeemed.<sup>162</sup>

## **THE INVASION OF THE CITY BY THE CITY**

Eugene Peterson catches the thrust of the vision of heaven as a place here, a New City, when he says:

Many people want to go to heaven the way they want to go to Florida -- they think the weather will be an improvement and the people decent. But the biblical heaven is not a nice environment far removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion of the city by the City.

We enter heaven not by escaping what we don’t like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us. There is not so much as a hint of escapism in St. John’s heaven. This is not an eternal weekend away from the responsibilities of employment and citizenship, but the intensification and the healing of them.<sup>163</sup>

## **THE NEW JERUSALEM AS THE PEOPLE**

Revelation 21:3 states, “Behold the dwelling of God is with humans.” Now that the covenant people of God have fulfilled their role of being a light to the nations, all nations will share in the privileges and the promises of the covenant people. The hiStory of both Israel and the church comes to fulfillment in the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 5 had referenced the nations before the throne of God. Revelation 7 describes the nations before the throne of God. Now in Revelation 21 and 22, the final vision of all humanity in a new heaven and new earth, includes peoples from all over the earth. All of this reverberates with the Genesis 10 table of the nations, and the Genesis 12:1-3 promise to Abram to bless the nations through his descendants. The community of God’s people, at many times

seemingly limited to twelve Jewish tribes or to a small band of disciples, someday will cover the world.

“On the gates and the walls were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the Lamb the names on the twelve gates” (21:12-14). The entire redeemed community is included. So the hiStory of the covenant people, both of the one nation Israel and of the church redeemed from all the nations, will find its final fulfillment in the full inclusion of all nations in its own covenant privileges and promises.

## **RESURRECTED BODY**

We know that our persons will have continuity from this life to the new earth. We will be resurrected. Our scattered selves, dissolved completely by death will be regathered and resurrected -- that is, transformed into a resurrected body.

This vision is grounded in the creation of the world. If God can create us from nothing at the beginning he can recreate us at the resurrection. Finding our ashes will be no challenge for the Creator God. As was true of Jesus' resurrected body, our identity will be preserved, but we will be changed. We cannot say exactly how we will be changed. “What we will be has not yet been made known.” But we know that when he appears “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (I John 3:2).

We know that the terrible addictions, corruptions and chronic failures of this life will be a thing of the past. We will have bodily limitations, but our new bodies will have abilities previously unknown.

This restored life will have continuity as well as discontinuity with what we experience now. Jesus' resurrected body is the prototype. Jesus' resurrected body was Jesus' body, wounds and all. Yet Jesus seems to have a new ability to pass through locked doors and to cover great distances quickly. There will be surprises. “No eye has seen, nor ear has heard...what God has prepared for those who love him” (I John 2:9). However, we do know we will live in resurrected bodies within a restored creation.<sup>164</sup>

Resurrected bodies -- embodied persons living together in a resurrected creation -- this is our destiny!

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis describes hell as a place where people continue moving away from one another. Great distances separate us. By contrast, a transformed earth will include transformed community; living together in love, justice and creativity.

We have given full reign to the blood of Christ over the private individual. But often we have ignored the reign of the blood of Christ over race relations, political injustice and sexism.<sup>165</sup> The reign of the blood of Christ will obliterate racism, political injustice and the demeaning of women. Christ will have unlimited authority.

## **SIGNPOSTS, NOT PHOTOGRAPHS**

We have only signposts, not photographs, of Who and what is coming. We do not know precisely what this means in practice. We also do not have photographs of what our lives are to look like now as a result of this vision of the end. Yet we are confident that what we do now is going in to the new age. I do not know, for example, what musical instruments we shall have to play or how much of Bach or Beethoven or Mozart will get in. But I am betting some of their music is in!

I do not know what architecture or paintings will come in, and I do not know how my planting a tree now, as Luther says, will relate to the forestry of the new earth, and I do not know how work for justice for the poor or the helpless will reappear in the new age. But I do know that the kingdom has been launched by Jesus, and that as the resurrected Lord he calls us to “practice resurrection.”

I know that he calls us as Spirit-filled witnesses and signs of the age, to come to bring signs and symbols of the kingdom to birth on earth as it is heaven.

## **CHAPTER 30: WHAT WILL BE OUR ROLE?**

Within this breathtaking, radical vision of the ultimate goal of all things -- the new heaven and new earth, flooded with the presence of God and the justice of God -- we might well ask what place and what role will human beings have within this new world? This question differs sharply with the popular culture view that heaven is bland and boring. As described by a character in the 2010 movie *The Lovely Bones*, “Heaven is a place where nothing happens.”

## **PRIESTING AND REIGNING**

In Genesis 1:26-28, divine image-bearers are commanded “to reign over the fish of the sea, the birds in the air, and over every living creature that goes on the ground.” Being a divine image-bearer is not a license to rape and pillage the creation. It is a call to become earth keepers. Creation is a project intended to go somewhere. The Creator has a future in mind for it, and human life -- this strange creation, full of mystery and glory -- is the means by which God is going to take his project forward. “Image-bearer” means humans represent and discharge the will of the Creator in the creation.

God’s people were also early on called to be a kingdom of priests. “You will be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:1-6).

By the time of Jesus, the ministry of priesting Israel or the world had vanished. The temple was a house of mammon, and the Levitical priesthood did not exist. Israel generally did not priest the nations, but rather hated and cursed the nations.<sup>166</sup> Certainly Israel was not ruling or reigning over anybody, but rather was oppressed. All of this changes at the coming of the Lord.

The Apocalypse at 5:9-10 says of the new people of God, “And you made them worshippers and priests to our God and they shall reign on earth.”

In the final chapter of the Bible we find two things highlighted as the central activities of renewed human beings within God’s new creation: worshipping and reigning. These are the twin vocations of the new people in the new city.

“The throne of God and the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (22:3-5).

The early Christians believed on the authority of Jesus himself that the original vision for creation and for humans within it, had been recaptured and restored in Jesus. Jesus himself spoke of a regeneration of all things coming. What Jesus did and said was destined to give a decisive answer to the question, “What would it look like if God were running things?”

### **BUILDING FOR THE KINGDOM**

God builds the kingdom. We build for the kingdom like a stonemason. The architect has set out the design. Now the foremen stonemason gives out the assignments for us to shape our stones now so that someday, in a scheme too grand for our imagination, they will fit in the great cathedral that will cover the whole creation. God builds the kingdom. We build for the kingdom.<sup>167</sup>

### **THE FINAL CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP**

At the end of the Bible’s True Story comes an urgent call for us to get into the Story. All of the great telling and retelling of the Story back to Deuteronomy had been designed to call the people into the Story. Beginning in Revelation 22:7, John repeatedly admonishes his readers to “keep these words, do these words, neither subtracting or adding to them; wash their robes” all in anticipation of Christ who is coming. These admonitions are a clear end-times call to discipleship. There is nothing comparable to this call to discipleship in the Bible. The Apocalypse challenges, thrills, envisions, exhorts, rebukes, encourages, teaches, reminds, warns and calls on all who confess Jesus as Lord to get into the Story as martyr-witnesses.

The new heaven and new earth is the inheritance of the overcomers: “He who overcomes will inherit all of this.” This is a call to discipleship. But those who surrender to the beast shall be in the lake of fire (verse 8).

### **CONCLUDING REFLECTONS: ISRAEL’S HOPES**

The hope of Israel was for the kingdom to come and for God’s people to be in God’s place under God’s rule. This hope, by the end of the Old Testament period, included a people for

God's name, a land for the people, the restoration of the city of Jerusalem, a rebuilt and glorious temple of the Lord, and the nations coming to be blessed by the Lord. All of these end-times hopes are hopes of the kingdom of God coming to the earth.

### **ISRAEL'S HOPES TRANSFORMED AND FULFILLED**

Jesus comes announcing the fulfillment of all the promises of God. The kingdom of God comes to this earth. By the end of the Scripture Story, the people of God are reconstituted around Jesus, the Holy Land is the perfect cube (the Holy of Holies covering the entire earth), the holy city, the New Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven to cover the whole earth as the Holy Land, the Lord Jesus' resurrected body is the new temple (the unique place of the presence of God and those living as Christ's body are now described as temples of the Lord), and the new people of God, his holy temples, go out to the nations to bless them with the good news of the kingdom of God.

### **THE CREATOR AND NEW CREATOR -- BOOKENDS OF THE STORY**

Think of the Bible's bookends: Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. The dominant themes of the Great Drama of the world are Creation and New Creation.

The Creator God makes all things new. Seeing God as Creator was essential to the development of Jewish and Christian eschatology. If God could also be the source of all things, he could also be the source of quite new possibilities for his creation in the future. Creation is open to the fresh creative possibilities of its Creator.

The Jewish hope was not based on belief in the inherent capacity of human nature to survive death. It was fundamentally a form of trust in God the Creator, who, as he gave life that ends in death, can give life back to the dead. More than that, he can give new life, raised forever beyond the threat of death.

If faith in God raises the possibility of new creation, it is trust in his covenant faithfulness to his creation that gives hope for new creation. A rainbow appears in the vision of God the Creator in chapter 4 of the Apocalypse. It is this faithful Creator who is worthy of praise. Foundational to everything in John's Revelation is God the Creator who will not give up on his good creation and his rebel divine image-bearers.

God the Creator of all reality acts in faithfulness to his creation --who in Christ acts to reclaim and renew his creation. Because he is creation's Alpha, he will also be its Omega. The scope of the new creation is as wide as the creation. It is as Creator that he claims his universal kingdom. For it is as Creator that he can renew his creation, taking it beyond the threat of evil and nothingness into the eternity of his own presence.

## **CONSISTENT WITH THE ENTIRE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS**

The vision of Revelation 21-22 is consistent with the vision within II Peter 3, which describes a transformed, purified, physical creation: “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and new a new earth, the home of righteousness” (3:12-13).

It is totally consistent with Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 when he speaks of a purification of resurrected believers, resulting in the burning up of the “wood and stubble” in our lives, preparing us for a heaven where a lot will happen!

Paul’s reference in Romans 8:23 to the redemption of the physical body is in concert with the resurrection. “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so but ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Redemption refers to the liberation of our bodies which can only come when the body is resurrected and transformed. We will be liberated from sin’s corruption but our bodies will not be annihilated.

### **PETER’S PREACHING**

The final vision of Revelation 21-22 is totally consistent with Peter, who when preaching in Acts 3:21, says of Jesus, “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything as he promised long ago through the holy prophets.” The restoration of all things refers to the prophetic hope of the new heaven and new earth, to the restoration of all things to their original beauty, holiness and glory and much more.

First, the Book of Acts describes the gospel of the kingdom going out to the known world. Paul is preaching the kingdom of God everywhere. In other words, God rules, and only God rules. He seeks to fill the earth with this announcement. The kingdom has come to the earth, but the kingdom is still to come, restoring all things.

### **JESUS’ VISION**

Revelation 21-22 is utterly consistent with Jesus’ statements about the coming kingdom. Jesus spoke to his disciples of “eating and drinking the Lord’s Supper with them in the coming kingdom” (Luke 22.18). This vision is of an actual eating and drinking in the coming kingdom; there is no way to even talk about disembodied spirits eating and drinking! This vision of the messianic meals, coupled with passages such as Matthew 19:28, where Jesus said, “I tell you the truth at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel,” point to a physical existence, albeit a transformed physical existence on a kingdom-filled earth.

We pray, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” This prayer clearly asks the Lord to bring his kingdom as it now is in heaven to earth! This is the heart of the prayer he

taught us to pray. This prayer had been the passion of the prophets for hundreds of years. It has nothing to do with going to heaven when we die.

Jesus declares he is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He is the one who will raise our mortal bodies from the dead. So why would we have resurrected bodies if we are to go to where bodies are useless?

### **OLD COVENANT END-TIMES VISIONS**

The final vision of Revelation 21-22 is consistent with Old Covenant visions of who and what is coming. At the end of the Old Covenant Scriptures, Daniel is prophesying a resurrection of bodies from the dead (chapter 12). Isaiah of the exile is prophesying of a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65-66). These are earthy visions where the Lord transforms the entire earth—personally, cosmically and communally. Ezekiel sees the presence of God causing Israel’s bleached bones to live. This is a resurrection vision. All of these visions flow into the transformed vision of Revelation 21-22.

Going back to the very beginning, the vision is two divine-image bearers working as representatives of the Creator and caring for the creation (Genesis 1:26-28). They were to rule over the creation as the servants of the Lord, stewarding it and bringing it to its fulfillment as the Lord’s creation. This is the same vision as Revelation 5:10 and 22:5 in the new creation. Creation was not static and neither is the vision of the new creation. So Revelation describes resurrected believers ruling and reigning in the new heaven and new earth as ministers of the kingdom of God, living out the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:26-28.

The themes of Revelation 21-22 evoke Genesis 1-2 as the tree of life reappears. The great unity of the sprawling Scripture and the great drama of Scripture finds its goal and destiny in the end as Christ unites all things.

### **CORRUPTIONS OF FINAL VISION:SELF-CENTERED SALVATION, NOT COMPREHENSIVE SALVATION**

Often the whole concept of salvation has revolved around me. Yet the whole of Revelation, indeed the whole Story of the Bible, leads us to look forward in hope to all of creation restored in comprehensive wholeness. Within that wholeness, there will be a place for us. Redemption is cosmic in scope. This means the personal, the communal and the physical in all their dimensions will be restored. The Lord is the center of all this, not us!

Human beings were made to enjoy fellowship with God in the full context of creational life. Sin and its effects touch all of life. God’s plan to deal with sin included his plan to destroy the enemy of his good creation, not the creation itself. If redemption does not go as far as the consequences of sin, it is a misnomer and fails to be redemption.

## **NOT JUST SALVATION OF INDIVIDUALS**

The salvation of any number of individuals is not redemption of what fell, but the gathering up of a few splinters. In such a case, Satan's mischief would have gone further than Christ's redemption. But the Story of the Bible moves toward a conclusion in which God's restorative work will utterly undo all of Satan's mischief.

Throughout Scripture, God's kingdom is depicted as a place and time of cosmic restoration. In the Old Testament prophecies God says, "Behold I will create a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). After Jesus conquered sin on the cross and returned from the grave in triumph over death itself, Peter proclaims the good news in Jerusalem, saying "Jesus must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). Paul also emphasized the universal scope of God's redemptive work. "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus and through him to reconcile to himself all things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:19-20; Ephesians 1:10).

Nothing has been untouched by sin; therefore, nothing is untouched by God's redemption.

## **PRIVATE EXPERIENCES**

The cosmic aspect of salvation has been increasingly lost since the enlightenment's secularization of Christianity, when salvation became a private experience of going to heaven. All of the political, cultural, communal and cosmic dimensions were lost in the church culture. But clearly the end of the Bible is not just about a new me or a new you; it's about a new heaven and a new earth as well. As pop singer Sting once asked, "What good would it be to be a new or raised person on an old or poisoned earth?"

## **TRIVIALIZING THE END TIMES**

Questions about the end times, signs of the times, the antichrist, the millennium, the great tribulation and the rapture often draw more interest than the new creation that is to be born. This is like being concerned about the nature, strength and frequency of labor pains rather than an interest in who is going to be born.

## **WHERE DO WE GO AT DEATH?**

The issue of where we go at death before the Lord returns is mentioned in Scripture, but is not the final vision. The Thessalonian church was distressed that some of her members had already died. They were concerned that these deceased members were lost forever. Paul assures

them of the coming of the Lord and the accompanying resurrection of the dead of all those who died in him (4:13-18).

In the New Testament there are at least two stages of the afterlife that we must take into account. One is the condition of those believers who have died before the end of history. Where, we might ask, are our departed loved ones now? The Bible doesn't give a very detailed account of their present condition.

But it does assure us that when Christians are "away from the body they are at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8), because death cannot separate a believer from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). But this condition is only an interim or an intermediate state in which believers who have died are waiting for something further to happen. It is in short "waiting for the resurrection."

It may be that so little is said in Scripture about where we go at death because it is a temporary state of affairs, an interim condition until Christ appears in glory and believers get their resurrection bodies.

### **WHERE'S GRANDMA?**

Revelation does not give us a picture of disciples suddenly transported out of this world to live a spiritual existence in heaven forever and ever. Where did we get such a notion? Currently we get it from funerals, where we talk about the deceased going to heaven. This may be the only time we think about or hear anybody talk about heaven. After the funeral is over, we rarely talk of the next life until we go to the next funeral, when the overriding question is, "Where has our loved one gone?"

### **FALSE HOPES OF IMMORTALITY**

The corruption of the Christian hope with the Greek notions of the soul's immortality works against any full-bodied vision of the restoration of all things. The next life becomes about my soul going to heaven. There is no sense of redeemed physicality in this. There is no communal or cosmic dimension to this. There is no world-changing discipleship. In fact, we often think, "I am going to heaven, and all of this will be burned up. So it does not really matter what I do now."

For Paul, however, resurrection is at the very center of our hope in the Lord. He never teaches the notion of the "immortal soul going to heaven." In fact, if there is no resurrection, the idea of an immortal soul is simply irrelevant. There is no fallback hope. Paul concludes that if there is no resurrection, then we are hopeless. The resurrection is the power of the future presently living in our bodies. If the resurrection is not living in our bodies, then we are lifeless and hopeless.

## **BEWILDERMENT AND BOREDOM**

Those who talk about the end times as if they had a calendar outlining God's specific plans have discredited the discussion. We have all become a bunch of theological speculators as to when Jesus is coming and what place such notions as the rapture, the antichrist, the tribulation and the millennial reign will play in all of this. Most believers are simply bewildered and skeptical of it all. Such speculation obscures Scripture's declaration that Christ will appear, that he will raise the dead, that he will set all things right, and that he will usher in the new heavens and the new earth.

## **LIVING IN A NEW WORLD -- THE POWER OF THE FUTURE**

For the sake of clarity let's summarize the vision we are given by the Spirit who tells us the True Story of God's future!

1. Jesus Christ the Lord, crucified, resurrected and ascended, presently rules and reigns with God as Lord of the cosmos and head of his body, the church. His Spirit now lives in the church as a down payment of who and what is to come (2 Corinthians 5:5).
2. Christ the Lord will return and appear in consummate glory, revealing to the entire creation his current but hidden position as Lord of all. He will fill all things in heaven and earth. This vision dominates the vision of every writer of New Testament (Revelation 21-22).
3. The world's Story is unfinished until he comes to complete it. The coming of Jesus Christ the Lord is the focus of Christian hope because his future is our future and that of all creation. Otherwise we have no future. The idea of the immortality of the soul is a philosophical construction without foundation in biblical revelation (I Corinthians 15:13-19).
4. The vision of his coming is often described by the use of the Greek word *parousia*, the word used in the Greco-Roman world for the return of a victorious king who would be welcomed by citizens going out of the city to meet him and welcome him into the city. This is the imagery used in I Thessalonians 4:15, translated coming. The vision is of the dead and those alive going out to meet Jesus to welcome him to earth. This is not a vision of believers leaving the planet or of the Lord hauling the believers away. It is a vision, utterly consistent with I Corinthians 15 and Revelation 21-22, of the Lord coming to rule and reign on this earth. The secular background of this word powerfully communicates the believers' joy and their coming out to welcome their beloved Lord to the earth after greeting him in the air.
5. The Lord will come unexpectedly. Any other speculation is an unwise and unwanted distraction.

6. The dead will be raised at Christ's appearance. The voice of the Son of God calling the dead to life (John 5:25) is equivalent to the creative Word of God, which effected creation in the beginning (Genesis 1). The Son of God calls us to new creation just as the Lord God called the creation into existence. A foundational theme throughout all of Scripture is the continuity of Creation and New Creation, sustained by the Lord God of enduring covenant love. Only about five percent of the discussion of the afterlife in the New Testament focuses on heaven or hell; the other ninety five percent focuses on the resurrection.
7. People have strange ideas as to what Easter or the resurrection of Jesus and his disciples is about. Resurrection is not about the cycle of the season and crops, the Far Eastern notion of reincarnation, the Greco-Roman idea of the immortality of the soul, or the typical Christian idea of dying and going to heaven. All of these are ways of thinking about the afterlife, but they should not be confused with the New Testament and the Jewish idea of resurrection.
8. Jesus will judge the world, setting all things right (Revelation 19). We will be judged by the Creator and Liberator of the world. Judgment will purify all those destined for the new heaven and new earth, and will direct us to our final destiny. Banishment from the presence of God forever is clearly not the will of God. "The Lord is not willing that any should perish." But as Dallas Willard said when asked who will go to hell, "all those who want to." Hell is for all those who prefer it! Sin, death and Satan will be destroyed (see Revelation 19-22). The Last Judgment calls us to full accountability then and now, as does nothing else. For we have been oblivious to the judgments in this life. We have ignored the cross of Christ as an utter condemnation of sin and yet radical grace for sinners. But we shall not run forever, and we shall not hide in the dark forever. The Day of Judgment is coming when all things will be set right. Jesus' judgment is good news, for even now the blood of millions of innocents cries out for justice.
9. There will be a new creation. These words evoke the first creation but go beyond anticipating a new creative act of God. It requires an originating act of God, just as did the first creation. In this case it will be an act which preserves the identity of the first creation while creatively transforming it (Romans 8:19-23, 2 Peter 3:7, Isaiah 65:17, Revelation 21:1, II Corinthians 5:17). New creation is the widest possible vision, the entire creation being newly created. There is no human destiny apart from the rest of creation. The Christian hope has constantly been misunderstood as hope for human fulfillment in another world (heaven) rather than as hope for the eternal future of this world in which we live. It has also mistakenly spoken of the soul's disembodied salvation apart from human bodies and all other bodies on the planet.
10. As the entire planet, including all humans, is consumed by the glorious presence of God, heaven will usher in the new earth (Revelation 21-22). In being city as well as paradise, it takes all that is good in human culture after Eden through transformation into the eternal kingdom of God. It is not only paradise regained; it is human culture redeemed (Revelation

21:24-26). It must be the place where humans and God are at one and humans and nature are one, as was the case in Eden, but also where human civilization is in harmony with wild nature, as has never been the case. The entire cosmos is redeemed, restored, and reconciled to God who fills all in all (2 Peter 3: 10-13 and Revelation 21:22-24).

11. The vision of the banquet, the marriage feast as the great festival of the world, figures prominently in Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God on earth (Isaiah 25, Matthew 8:10-11, Luke 21:15-18, Revelation 19:9). In the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, those who scarcely eat enough to stay alive will eat their fill, those brutalized and murder as children and all those ravaged by the innumerable injustices of this world will join fully in the merriment (Luke 6:21, Revelation 9:16).
12. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." We will rest from our labors and enjoy the joy of God in all of creation. There must be an end to restless frustration. If God is really God it must be better finally to find God than to seek God.
13. In the new heaven and new earth, renewed human beings, followers of Jesus, will exercise sovereignty under the Lord, the dominion and wise stewardship over the world that God always intended for his image-bearing creatures. They will be priests and rulers, summing up the praises of all creation and exercising authority on behalf of God and the Lamb (Genesis 1:26-28, Revelation 3:21, 5:9-10, 22:3-5, Matthew 19:28, Romans 5:17, I Corinthians 6:1-5).
14. The church exists on this earth during these end times as Christ's witness to the kingdom come in the crucified Christ. Between the times of Christ's incarnation and his appearance in glory, the church is called to preach the gospel of the kingdom rule of God to the entire world and to embody the gospel of God in her local communities.
15. The vision of the kingdom coming shapes the present community and the work we are called to do. Hope shapes human life. The dawn is breaking. The light is coming. How can we possibly live as night people? (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11) The "now" is here and the "not yet" is very near. The longing for the Lord is stirred up in us by the Spirit who is a great big down payment on who and what is coming (Ephesians 1:13-14).

The power of the future that lives in and among us now enlivens, empowers and shapes every aspect of the church's life, including all political, economic and cultural relationships. This is true because the Lord who rules is the Creator of the world. We exist as a colony of heaven now. Heaven lives in us in the form of God's Spirit and we exist to extend the Lord of heaven's rule and influence on earth now (Philippians 3:20-21).

If the new heaven and new earth will be a place of peace and justice, then quarreling, slander, litigation and violence have no place even now in the community that is empowered and

shaped by the future. Loving, serving, mediating disputes, stewarding, practicing covenant faithfulness and interceding for all humanity prepare us for the ministry of the life to come.

## **THE LORD BRINGS THE TRUE STORY TO ONE GLORIOUS CONSUMMATION**

We seek to be formed by his vision as we live “between the times.” One way to do this is to ask ourselves the worldview questions asked at the outset of this book. After going through the six acts of the unfinished drama of Scripture our view of the world has expanded and matured so as to reflect the entire Story’s fullness.

### **WORLDVIEW OF HIS DISCIPLES IN THE FIFTH ACT**

Who are we? We are the disciples of Jesus, a new group, and yet not new, because we are children of Abraham, the father of faith. We are the people of all the nations for whom the creator God was preparing the way through his dealings with Israel and his work in Jesus of Nazareth.

Where are we? We are living in the world made by the God we worship, the world that does not yet acknowledge the true and only God.

What is wrong? Our forefathers rebelled against the One who made them. We have continued the descent into rebellion. The powers of paganism still rule the world, and from time to time find their way into the church.

What is the solution? The true God has acted decisively to defeat the powers and to create a new people, through whom he is to rescue the world of evil. The process of implementing the victory through his Spirit in his people is not yet complete.

What time is it? It is the time of the kingdom rule on earth of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. It is the time of active waiting on the Lord.

What may we hope for? That one day the King will return to raise the dead, judge or set things right here, and inaugurate a new kingdom on a different level than the kingdoms of this world. Those disciples who have died will be raised to a new physical life. The present powers will be forced to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and justice and peace will triumph at last.

What must we do? We must live as witnesses of Jesus Christ the Lord, taking the gospel to the nations and living in the new community as redeemed children of God who now exercise authority as his image-bearers. We are compelled to grow up into the likeness of Christ so as to honor the Lord and bless the earth until he comes.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How are creation and end times connected as one great vision within the True Story?
2. Describe several practical ways that eschatology (end times) impacts on the Corinthian church, using I Corinthians.

3. Describe the hope of resurrection -- personal, cosmic and communal in Revelation 2-22 and throughout the New Testament.
4. Why is it good news that Jesus is coming to judge the world.