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AND JIM MULLINS

THE SYMPHONY OF MISSION

PLAYING YOUR PART
IN GOD'S WORK IN THE WORLD



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STORY

Listening to the Symphony

“First, we must learn to listen!” This was the mantra that Mr. Terry, my seventh-grade band teacher, would repeat each day to an impatient class of teenagers. Before we picked up the shiny new instruments our parents had purchased for us, Mr. Terry wanted us to learn how to listen to music. And so, for the first several weeks of class, he played famous pieces by Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart. He encouraged us to listen closely to the nuances of each movement. He helped us discern the sounds of each instrument and explained the historical context of each piece. By having us listen to these musical masterpieces, he was giving us the big picture and showing us what we were stepping into.

Inevitably, impatience would get the better of us. Whenever Mr. Terry stepped out of the classroom—even for a brief moment—dozens of us would flip open the cases under our chairs, pick up our instruments, and begin making truly horrible sounds. Wendell’s trumpet sounded like an elephant with asthma, Dave made the drums sound like drunk thunder, and I slobbered and hooted on the reed of my clarinet.

Wendell, Dave, and I never really learned how to play those instruments. We wanted to perform without first learning how to *listen* to music. We eventually dropped the class, but several of our friends continued and actually learned how to play. By being willing to listen, they became able to participate. Later, when we were in high school, I would often listen to them play powerful songs

from their place in the stands of the football stadium. I was glad I could be on the football team, but I always wondered what it would have been like to actually learn how to play a musical instrument.

When it comes to the symphony of God’s mission, we must start by listening. Though many of us pick up books like this one because we want to learn how to *perform* in God’s mission, we first need to be *informed*, and that happens by listening. We need to listen to how God and his people have been performing the symphony of mission for thousands of years, to reflect on the biblical story and how it shapes us for mission. As we do this, we will understand the nature and scope of God’s mission and how to join in. If we are unwilling first to listen to God’s symphony, then our attempts to participate might just result in loud, obnoxious noise. But if we listen to the biblical story and allow it to shape the way we live in the world, we might just be able to join God in playing the music of the gospel for our neighbors.

In this chapter, we will take a look at the biblical story as a whole so that we can better understand the wide scope of God’s mission. This chapter is not meant to replace the words of Scripture but to give an overview of its broad movements—creation, rebellion, and restoration—to shape our view of God’s mission to restore and reconcile his good creation.

The Question of Mission

I asked several friends from different backgrounds what they thought of when they heard the word *mission*. Here were some of their responses:

- Acts of rescue and bravery, like the coast guard rescuing a capsized sailor
- Pithy corporate mission statements
- California architecture
- Indigenous people being stripped of their culture
- Tortilla chips
- Space travel
- Mormon missionaries on bicycles

As you can see, the answers greatly varied. I’m also aware that even among my primary audience of Christians within North America, this word carries different shades of meaning. Some associate *mission* with planting churches overseas, while others associate being “missional” with hipster Christians drinking craft beer. Furthermore, I know that some of my Muslim friends

might associate Christian mission with military crusades. The word *mission* comes with a lot of baggage.

But the word itself is a simple one and comes from a Latin word meaning “to send.” And when we open the pages of the Gospels, we see that our God is a sending God. The Father sends Jesus into the world as the savior of the world, and Jesus sends his Spirit to continue his work in and through his people. Jesus also sends his people to bear witness to his saving work (John 20:21). In this chapter, we will observe how God’s mission is to restore all that’s broken in the world and how he creates a community to participate in that mission. Christopher J. H. Wright puts it this way: “Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation.”¹ In this book, *mission* always refers to God’s continuing work to restore creation and to our own active participation in that work.

When I talk to some of my friends who don’t yet know Jesus, they bristle at the idea of Christian mission. They think it’s arrogant to try to change people’s opinions about what they believe and to make claims about Jesus being the savior of the world. They will often say that faith should be private: “It’s good if it helps you, but you should keep it to yourself.” On one hand, I can sympathize with their concern. Many people have tried to promote Christianity in aggressive, harmful, or disrespectful ways, often doing more damage than good. However, in a sense we are all on a mission because all of us are attempting to figure out how this messed-up world could ever be made right. And if we think we have the answer, why would we want to keep it to ourselves?

Underneath the troubling thoughts that taunt us at night and the headlines that haunt our days, we are all asking the same question: How can things be made right? Every pill we pop, every tear we cry, every bullet fired from the barrel of a gun is another small monument to the mystery we are trying to solve.

Humanity has sought to solve the mystery of the world’s brokenness in a myriad of ways. We’ve established religions and rituals to try to please God (or “the gods”) in hopes of garnering favor. Some of the things that we treat as gods may not seem like gods, but when we trust technology or political ideologies to save us, they become the center of our lives and so function as our gods. Sometimes we promote them with the religious zeal of a missionary, even though they continually fail us.

1. Christopher Wright, *Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 22–23.

We've sought salvation in technologies that have certainly benefited the world but have never fulfilled their promises. Often they've simply made new and bigger problems. Nuclear fission brings heat to cold homes—but also the threat of a nuclear winter. The internet promises to bring us together, but it makes a world of lonely people who spend more time looking at glowing rectangles than into the faces of other people. In an attempt to solve the mystery of the world's brokenness, we've also established political and economic systems like communism, socialism, and capitalism, along with many other failed isms, that promise freedom but make us slaves.

Even modern-day health fads are attempts to solve the mystery of brokenness. But essential oils aren't potent enough to cover the stench of sin. Veganism will never find enough kale to cover our shame. A paleo diet cannot restore us to our original humanity. Crossfit cannot make us strong enough to carry the weight of the world's brokenness. Our world is marked by a brutal and comprehensive brokenness: we are spiritually cut off from God, socially separated from one another, and physically alienated from the flourishing we were intended to experience. All serious questions about how to restore goodness to this broken world reveal our longing for salvation, our desire for a mission worth pursuing.

God's Purpose and Plan

In Ephesians 1:11 we are told that God has a plan and that he is working it out in history. God's mission is the working out of his plan as it is narrated in the Bible, a plan that has a certain goal toward which he is moving, a destination at the end of a long historical journey.

What is this goal? The Bible describes it in many different ways. Paul tells us that when times reach their fulfillment, God will bring *unity to all things* in heaven and earth under Christ (Eph. 1:10). In another passage Paul says that God's goal is to *reconcile to himself all things* on earth or in heaven (Col. 1:20). Peter describes this same goal as the *restoration of everything* as promised by the prophets (Acts 3:21). Jesus tells us that the purpose of God's mission is the *renewal of all things* (Matt. 19:28). For many first-century Jews, the goal toward which God was moving was to establish the *kingdom of God*, and Jesus affirms this expectation when he announces the good news of the arrival of the kingdom (Mark 1:14–15)—though not quite in the way Israel expected. The prophets speak of the goal of history as the coming of *shalom*, the restoration of the original creational harmony among God, humanity, and the nonhuman creation (Isa. 9:7; 52:7; Zech. 9:10). Moses uses a similar term when he speaks of *blessing* as the goal of God's mission; the blessing

that was enjoyed in the original creation by both nonhuman and human (Gen. 1:22, 28) will be restored first to God's people and then, through them, to the whole world (Gen. 12:2–3; Gal. 3:8–9).

Though these images differ slightly from one another and accent different things, together they point to the fact that God's mission is to restore the entire creation and the life of humankind to what God intended in the beginning. The goal of God is not to take a people out of this world to live as disembodied spirits in heaven but to restore a people to live bodily in the midst of a restored creation. God's mission is not merely to clean up some individuals so they can live with him in heaven but to clean up the creation so he can come back and live here with us. God's mission is to return the world to what it's supposed to be.

Creation: The Way It's Supposed to Be

In the beginning God created the world with astounding beauty and overwhelming goodness. Creation is God's masterpiece. Beethoven composed the Ninth Symphony, Coltrane wrote *A Love Supreme*, Hugo wrote *Les Misérables*, and Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel. But these masterpieces, as great as they are, pale in comparison with the first and ultimate work of art: God's creation of the world.

When you look at the first page of Scripture, you read that God is the creator of a “very good” creation. God creates his masterpiece by making light and darkness; the oceans and the atmosphere; land, water, and vegetation; the sun, moon, and stars; avian and aquatic life; and land animals. As he surveys every aspect of creation, he declares that it's good! His good creation contains both function and beauty, with things like trees, which give beauty to our eyes, food for our stomachs, clean air for our lungs, and shelter to protect us from harsh weather. Every morsel of goodness that you've ever enjoyed—from stargazing to playing a guitar—is the result of God's great work of creation. His work is perfect.

The most important character in the story of creation is God himself. The story is ultimately not about Adam and Eve, the serpent, or even the beauty of the garden, so much as about God. The earth is the arena where God will display his glory, majesty, goodness, and love. In this place there's perfect harmony among God, humanity, and the rest of his nonhuman creation. The whole earth is good and exists for God's glory.

The harmony and flourishing of the creation as it comes from the hand of God can be described by the Hebrew word *shalom*, a word that the prophets

later used to describe creation regained. It describes the purpose of creation and the goal of God's mission. It carries the rich meaning of a world that experiences flourishing because of right and harmonious relationships among God, people, and all creation. Cornelius Plantinga puts it this way:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. In English we call it peace, but it means far more than just peace of mind or ceasefire between enemies. In the Bible *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as the creator and savior opens doors and speaks welcome to the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.²

A world of *shalom* is marked by goodness and wholeness. The biblical story of creation invites us to imagine a world of *shalom*, where we delight in God, in one another, and in the nonhuman creation.

Flourishing in Relation to God

Genesis 1–2 describes life as humans experience and enjoy the intimacy of God's presence. Can you imagine what it would be like to experience communion with God without the distance, confusion, insecurity, and distortion of sin?

Instead of falling asleep in prayer, wondering if anyone is listening to your rambling, you would take naps in the perfect security of God's presence. Each moment would be filled with wonder as you explored God's great gift of creation, encountering oak trees in the forest and crawdads in the river. Each new discovery would cause your heart to beat strongly with worship, gratitude, and curiosity. Not only our prayers and encounters with nature, but all of our work and play, relationships and culture making, were designed to be pervaded by God's presence.

Each day you would stroll through a perfect park in perfect communion with God. Imagine a life without shame, where you truly knew God and were intimately known by him. Imagine the sum total of all the joyful relationships you've ever experienced. Those are mere hints of the infinitely deep joy that humanity is meant to experience in the unhindered presence of God. Think about every smile, warm embrace, rich conversation, and meal where you

2. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary on Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10 (italics original).

lingered long at the table because you didn't want to leave your company. The sum total of these experiences doesn't even begin to describe the type of flourishing that was known in the garden because of humankind's intimate knowledge of God.

Flourishing in Relation to One Another

God created the world so that men and women would flourish together in community in a vast array of relationships, not as isolated individuals. God says only one time before sin that creation is not good—when the first man is alone (Gen. 2:18)! He creates a companion for Adam, and he commands them to “be fruitful and multiply.” But this is not a command just to add people to the world. The commands to fill the earth, subdue it, and rule it follow. In other words, the act of human intimacy leads to human communities and a variety of healthy relationships and institutions. Life in God's world was intended to be relational, and we were made to flourish together in a multitude and variety of relationships.

Can you imagine life without social strife? Can you imagine conversations in which you knew that you were fully loved and known by the listener? Can you imagine a world where all people selflessly served one another? Can you imagine a world where arguments, insults, divorce, abuse, war, school shootings, and racism had never been known? It's difficult for us to fathom life without these things—but in the garden it would have been impossible to imagine their existence.

Flourishing in Relation to the Nonhuman Creation

After each day of creation is described in Genesis 1, God declares the goodness of what has been made. Each aspect of his world was created to provide meaningful work and deep rest without the presence of pain and suffering. Can you imagine what that would be like? Imagine feeling the warmth of the sun without the threat of skin cancer. Imagine a hard day of work where every moment is full of meaning and purpose, void of pain and monotony. Imagine delighting in the fruits of your labor and then completing each day with a feast of celebration—in weather better than San Diego's and with cuisine better than the finest Michelin-rated restaurant. Each breeze would remind you of the life that God had breathed into your nonasthmatic lungs; with each bite of food, you'd taste the glory of God's creation.

Shalom is the harmony of all creation, where God orchestrates all of life to work together perfectly for his glory. Shalom means perfect fellowship

between God and his creation and among all the parts of creation: lions and lambs, bermuda grass and tomato vines, men and women, children and parents, day and night, creativity and conservation, poetry and prose. Just as the goal of an orchestra is to bring all the instruments together in harmony to display the glory of what was composed, the goal of God's creation is to bring all aspects of life into harmony for the glory of the creator. Creation is a symphony of shalom.

Humanity: The Conductors of Creation

God is the composer of creation, but he doesn't choose to make music alone. He made humanity to be the unique part of his creation that joins him in his work. In Genesis 1 God declares each part of his creation to be "good," but the addition of humanity elevates the status of creation to "very good," because humans are uniquely commissioned to cultivate creation's potential. When God made Adam and Eve, he didn't create a mere audience for his own music but a class of apprentice musicians, commissioned to be the co-conductors of the symphony of creation.

Human beings have a unique vocation. We are given staggering authority (Ps. 8) and are called explicitly to "have dominion over" and to "subdue" creation (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:15). But these words have often been misunderstood. They aren't a mandate to scorch the earth through carelessness. Instead, they are an invitation to develop the hidden potential embedded in creation while caring for it (Gen. 2:15). These words call us to stewardship and summon us to join God in his work.

God didn't make a ready-made world. He created the raw material of all good culture and then commissioned humanity to be culture makers. From the soil of creation, humans were invited to make beautiful paintings, sturdy buildings, joyful playgrounds, efficient transportation, delicious recipes, and absorbing games. As they do this work with excellence, they display the majesty of the creator God whose image they bear. The first role we're called to play in the symphony of God's world is joining God in cultivating creational potential, opening up the order and beauty of the various aspects of creation through the work of our hands.

Our identity is as unique as our calling; we are the only part of God's creation made in his image (Gen. 1:26–28). There's something about us that uniquely displays what God is like. We are like monuments of God, placed in the world to pay homage to the true composer of creation. When humans fulfill their vocation, they display the brilliance of creation and the glory of God's character. This is the way it was intended to be.

After creating humans in his image and giving them the unique vocation of cultivating his world, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Gen. 1:28). The concept of blessing here is quite similar to that of shalom. In the Old Testament *shalom* carries the connotation of thriving and flourishing, of delight and joy, as we live according to God’s intended design. We enjoy the divine favor and empowerment for satisfying fruitfulness that comes from a right relationship with God, with others, and with the nonhuman creation.

In the garden, Adam and Eve enjoyed the abundance of God’s blessing, the perfection of God’s masterpiece of creation. They walked with God, relating to him with perfect love, reverence, and worship. Their days were filled with fruitful work and harmonious relationship. They were safe, secure, loved, and flourishing in a world with the perfect balance of productive work and delightful rest. They dwelled in harmony with God, each other, and the physical creation. They experienced spiritual, social, and physical well-being as God intended. And with the ongoing blessing of discovering even more of the goodness of creation together with God and each other, they were heirs to a marvelous future.

Rebellion: Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be

So all was well in the garden—until tragedy struck, when the harmony of shalom was shattered by rebellion.

God had given the whole world as a garden buffet to Adam and Eve to work within and to feast on. They had the freedom to explore and enjoy almost everything, to sink their teeth into every plant, except for one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:15–17). Life in the garden was abundant and perfect. Employed as God’s gardeners, their work was delightful and meaningful. The only possibility of pain, death, and decay was found in rebellion, in eating the fruit of that forbidden tree. The ripples of destruction from such an act would ultimately make their way through every aspect of creation, tearing the fabric of the perfect order and harmony of God’s world, vandalizing shalom. Things would then *not* be the way they were supposed to be.

On that fateful day, Satan, in the form of a serpent, whispered lies to Adam and Eve. He said that the fruit forbidden to them wouldn’t really bring death; instead, they could dethrone God with the special knowledge that came from

the tree. Tragically, they listened to the snake instead of to the Source of all goodness in the garden.

Adam and Eve gave the middle finger of rebellion and plucked the fruit from the tree, expecting a greater degree of life. Instead, it tasted like death. While the juice of the fruit still dripped off their chins, the world began to unravel. Soon it was filled with all manner of evil: death, destruction, and decay. The world that had been filled with harmony and abundance was soon filled with alienation and scarcity. A world intended for joyful worship, intimate relationships, fruitful work, and sensual delight in the goodness of creation had been infected by idolatry, injustice, and the curse. All because of sin.

Idolatry

Adam and Eve, who had walked with God as friends in the cool of the day, were now hiding from him. There would be no more afternoon picnics with God in the garden. Their act of rebellion was just the first in a long, weary history of rebellion and idolatry.

God had given humanity skilled hands with opposable thumbs to fashion good and beautiful things, to throw footballs, build oak tables, hold babies, and mold the world into a full and flourishing place that glorifies God. But instead we used those adept hands to carve idols, little statues to be worshiped in God's place. We began to worship the objects of our creation rather than the creator of all things, and this misdirected worship continues today. True, we may not carve statues—but we still make idols. We are creatures who worship and serve. It's our nature, and we can't change it. But rather than worshiping and serving God as the author of creation, we worship and serve created things and center our whole lives on them (Rom. 1:22–23, 25). Our sinful hearts make gods out of money, power, nations, sex, and many other once-good things that we have turned into evil by giving them the place of *ultimate* things. And this idolatry drives our social and cultural life. No wonder the Bible speaks about sin most often in terms of communal idolatry!

Injustice

Another effect that came from the rebellion of humanity was social alienation and disharmony. When Adam and Eve began to blame each other, their argument was the first in a long line of relational pain. The self-sacrificing love that had characterized relationships between people turned to self-serving attempts at mastery. Because of that one act of rebellion in the garden, we now live in a sin-stained world, where our reality is one of conflict, injustice,

fear, shame, and suspicion. Right now as you read these words, somebody is out there writing a racist comment on Facebook, someone is wounding a child with vicious words, someone is twisting together the wires of a bomb, someone is feasting and wasting their goods while another starves, and someone is lying in shame in a hotel room a few miles from their marriage bed. This is not the way the world is *supposed* to be. It's the way that it *is*—because of our sin and rebellion against God.

Adam and Eve didn't cease being image-bearers after they were evicted from paradise. They continued to fill the earth with people and develop culture. However, sin had infiltrated the heart of humanity, and idolatry had twisted every aspect of social and cultural life.

Genesis 4–11 provides a tragic overview of the spread of sin and its effects. The good gift of competition devolved into toxic rivalry; the good gift of work led to murder. Upon hearing of God's approval of Abel's excellent animal husbandry, Cain responded in a jealous rage that caused him to use the very hands that were meant to cultivate life as weapons to bring death to his brother.

Sin corrupts not only commercial life but also art, civics, and the full scope of human society. Cain, the former farmer (now with blood on his hands), became the founder of a city that would soon be filled with corruption (Gen. 4:17). Later we hear about Lamech, the author of the first poem after the fall (Gen. 4:23–24), celebrating his own brutality in a boastful song to his wives. Sin infiltrated every aspect of human life and culture—family, work, art, commerce, food, city planning—everything.

Sin is not just an individual act; it is also embodied in human communities and the cultural institutions that build systems and patterns of life to desecrate God's creation and devastate other image-bearers. Whole cultures form their lives around idolatry, and this leads to injury and injustice. Because of sin, we live in a world where entire systems are built around injustice, such as the global sex trade, companies that profit from abortion, and justice systems that give harsher sentences to the poor than the rich.

All of humanity deserves the judgment of God, and this is what we see in the story of Noah. God cleansed the earth with a flood, which hit the reset button on the world, intending to build a new humanity from the family that built the boat. However, Noah's family proved to be just as tainted by sin as their drowned neighbors; they too participated in idolatry, injury, and injustice (Gen. 6:5; 8:21). Yet rather than hitting the reset button again, God affirmed that he would continue his mission of filling the world with his glory as he blessed Noah and restated the cultural mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:1–17).

It's evident that the whole world is polluted by sin and needs to be rescued from the idolatry, injustice, and evil of the world. The very human beings who were created to reflect God's image became those who distort his image. Those who were made to care for God's good world have desecrated it. By the time we reach Genesis 11, we see the whole of human culture and society corrupting God's world. We see a world that desperately needs God to launch a rescue mission.

Curse

It is not just humanity that has been impacted by their own rebellion. Because humans were made rulers and stewards of the creation, the whole of that creation was drawn into the wake of human rebellion. A curse was placed on the nonhuman creation, and now it too (in the words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson) is "red in tooth and claw." Animals suffer, and the world convulses in earthquakes, tsunamis, and tornadoes. No wonder the whole suffering creation longs for the liberation of God's children, because it too will then be liberated from the bondage of the curse (Rom. 8:19–22).

The nonhuman creation is corrupted not only within itself but also in relation to humanity. The work of our hands is burdened by sin's effects. No longer is work delightful, joyful, and satisfying; too often it is filled with pain and boredom. Our selfish domination of the world and the culture making that ignores the biblical mandate of care and stewardship have created staggering problems—from hunger to AIDS, nuclear weapons to global warming, a dwindling energy supply to an impending water shortage, toxic chemical waste to the loss of protective ozone. We have become victims of our own exploitive and destructive desires.

Our bodies are wracked by pain and disease, and ultimately, we all face death. Right now, as you read this sentence, the physical effects of sin are wreaking havoc on the world. Somebody is sitting in a hospital hearing that their child has stage IV cancer; autism is muting the words of a beautiful person who just wants to be known; and bacteria in the very room in which you sit are seeking to assassinate you. Cancer, arthritis, flash floods, concussions, dehydration, diarrhea—they exist only because sin exists. Even if you have lived a relatively easy life or don't feel pain in this moment, you know that your day is coming. The eyes that you use to read this sentence will one day close.

These statements are not meant to bring gloom and despair—quite the opposite! When we know the bad news, we can finally hear the good news. When we feel the darkness, we can welcome the light. As we feel the bone-chilling cold of our reality, we long for the warmth. And there is good news, light, and warmth.

Restoration: Returning the World to the Way It's Supposed to Be

The creation groans—and we do too—longing for liberation from the pain and curse that have come on our world because of our foolish rebellion. We long for the world to be restored to the way it's supposed to be. And there is good news! The story of God's mission narrated in Scripture is precisely this good news: he intends to return the whole world and the entirety of human life to its original shalom and blessing, the way it's supposed to be. And we are called to participate in this mission. So let's listen carefully to the symphony, as it has been going on for some time, so that when our time comes, we can pick up our instruments and play our parts.

Israel

Rather than engaging in a solo performance, God chose to execute his mission in a peculiar way. He formed a human community set in the midst of the old world to be the nucleus of the new world he is calling into being. Sinful humans, who had rebelled against him and flooded the world with death, became his chosen instruments. Just like he composed the beautiful symphony of creation, he began to compose the masterpiece of re-creation, a symphony of mission aimed at restoring the corrupted creation. Like a composer picking out a pen to craft a masterpiece, God began by choosing a feeble couple, Abraham and Sarah, whose children would one day become a nation and begin the healing of a diseased creation. Indeed, quite strangely, God's mission began with the election of a childless couple who was trapped in the same idolatrous rebellion as everyone else (Josh. 24:2). In the story that unfolds from them we can listen to how God performs his mission through his people.

ABRAHAM AND HIS FAMILY

The human impulse is to use powerful tools for important tasks, but God's ways are often different. God launches his rescue mission by forming a community that would become his partner in countering the curse of sin. He doesn't adopt an existing superpower like Egypt but chooses one man, Abraham, from whom to build an entire nation.

God sends Abraham to another land, where he blesses him so that he might be a channel of that blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3; 18:18–19). Blessing is the human flourishing and delight that come when we live according to God's creational design. Blessing is the joy and satisfaction we find by living in right relationship with God, others, and the nonhuman

creation. Thus, if creational blessing and shalom are to be restored, they can come only in a restored relationship with God, one another, and the nonhuman creation. And this is precisely what we see in God's promise to Abraham.

The promise to Abraham extends to a people who will come from his and Sarah's children, a people who will be restored in their social, economic, and cultural relationships, living according to God's original intention in a fruitful land that is itself both the gift and blessing of God.

But all of this can be enjoyed only in relation to the God who gives it. The promise first given to Abraham in Genesis 12 soon takes the form of a binding agreement: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. . . . I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7–8). God is restoring a people to again love, serve, and worship him.

Blessing, then, is the restoration of relationship with God, one another, and the nonhuman creation. But this blessing isn't just for Abraham and his descendants, though it begins there. They are to be a channel of God's blessing to the surrounding nations, to all peoples on the earth. God chooses Abraham to "direct his children and his household after him" to keep the way of the Lord and do what is right and just. In this way they will display God's blessing, and God will, through them, bring blessing to all the nations on earth, for his love and care extend to them all (Gen. 18:18–19).

God's covenant people are to be the means by which God deals with the sin and evil of the world. The curse of Genesis 3–11 will be replaced by the blessing promised in Genesis 12. Abraham's family bore in their own lives the *promised* goal and purpose God has for the world. The blessing and shalom that will one day fill the whole earth when God *completes* his mission are to characterize God's people in the present as he launches that mission.

Such an exalted vocation! It almost sounds ludicrous to make this claim for God's people, especially when we read about the seemingly mundane and broken lives of Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants. Most of the book of Genesis narrates their story. What's clear from these chapters is that though God's people continually fail, God remains faithful to continue his mission and use his people. Genesis is not about the heroics of Abraham but about the loving heart of God, whose mission is to extend his blessing to all nations. He is El Shaddai, the one who has the power to overcome all barriers that stand in the way of restoring blessing to his creation (Gen. 17:1; cf. Exod. 6:2–3).

EXODUS

The Genesis story ends with a small tribe of Abraham's people making their way to Egypt to escape famine. Exodus opens four hundred years later and describes a vast number of people living in bondage to the Egyptian Pharaoh and the gods he represents. If Abraham's descendants are to be a people of blessing to the nations, they must first be liberated from the Egyptian gods. And so there is a dramatic showdown between Moses, who represents the Lord, and Pharaoh, the human representative of the Egyptian gods. God brings judgment on the Egyptian gods through a number of plagues aimed directly at their supposed powers (Exod. 12:12), and Israel is liberated from idols to serve the living God. Then, through Moses, God leads a reluctant and complaining people through the wilderness to Mount Sinai.

Why has God done all this for a small and little-known nation of slaves? Perhaps they wondered that too. The Lord tells Moses to answer this question with these words: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:4–6). The language of being a treasured possession is the language of election. It is precisely because the whole earth belongs to God that he chooses Israel to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. The role of a priest is to be a representative of God to the people and a mediator of God's presence and blessing. Israel is to assume a priestly role among the nations, to be a unique and holy people who display the wisdom of God's ways and act as mediators of his presence and blessing among the nations.

Israel's participation in God's mission isn't based on merit, strength, or competence but is a response to God's redemptive grace. Before sending them to the land to take up their mission, God takes up residence in their midst in the tabernacle. The God who rescued them is present and powerful among them to enable them to carry out their priestly mission.

LAW

Since God's people are to bear the promise of blessing, they are called to live distinctive and holy lives, manifesting God's shalom in the midst of the nations. And so God lays out a vision of what a holy, priestly kingdom might look like, ruled by a law based on loving God and neighbor (Exod. 20–23).

The law was good news for Israel; they celebrated the law in song as a way of life more precious than gold, more sweet than honey (Pss. 19:7–11; 119).

It governed the worship and service of God and made provision for patching up the broken covenant when Israel disobeyed (Leviticus). It shaped all of Israel's cultural, political, social, agricultural, and economic life to manifest the shalom and blessing of God (Deuteronomy). It directed them in faithful stewardship of the nonhuman creation. God's laws were uniquely beautiful in comparison to the laws of other nations because they were built on God's creational intentions for all that he had made. For example, God's law cared for the weak and powerless rather than protecting the rights of the powerful, unlike the other law codes of the day (and today!). God's law gave a glimpse of what shalom was supposed to look like in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context and displayed the unique wisdom of God's ways to the surrounding nations (Deut. 4:5–8). As Israel embodied and obeyed these decrees in their communal life, they were showing the world a pattern of life filled with blessing that would lead to the flourishing of all creation.

The laws of the surrounding nations were centered on the whims of harsh dictators, but God's law was centered on God's will for creation. Some of these laws may seem obscure to us, but they were intended to counteract the evil and unjust practices that were so prevalent in that day. We can see this in a small sampling of those laws: God's people are called to love God (Deut. 6:4) and neighbor (Lev. 19:18), honor the role of family (Lev. 19:3, 32), care for the poor (Deut. 15:7–11), pursue economic justice (Lev. 19:13), extend compassion to the disabled (Lev. 19:14), display fairness in their legal system (Lev. 19:12, 14), practice commercial honesty (Lev. 19:35–36), maintain sexual integrity (Lev. 19:20–22), practice environmental stewardship (Lev. 25:4), and extend care and hospitality to immigrants (Deut. 10:18–19).

Many of these examples come from Leviticus 19. In this chapter, God gives his people a vision for holiness but first explains why holiness is so important: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (v. 1). God's people are to be the living analogy and visible example of God's holiness. If they obey these laws, they will display to the nations around them the God who is good, loving, just, wise, and merciful and who cares for the fullness of creation.

LAND

God promised Abraham that he would make his family into a people with a land of their own. Blessing, flourishing, and shalom mean taking one's place in the good creation, being at home in this world, as Adam and Eve were in the garden. Israel did not know this joy until well after the exodus. Abraham and the patriarchs wandered around Palestine with only the *promise* of a physical homeland (Heb. 11:9). The Israelites were landless immigrants in Egypt,

and after they left, they wandered through the wilderness with no home to call their own. But this all changed when the Lord (keeping his promise to Abraham) took Israel into the land under Joshua (Josh. 21:43–45).

The land was given as a gift—the beachhead of the new creation—so Israel could know and manifest God’s shalom. But as always in God’s economy, a gift brings task, and privilege brings responsibility. Israel was to faithfully embody God’s law in the land as a sign of God’s purpose to restore blessing and shalom to *all* nations and the *whole* creation. But the land also came with temptation and danger. The peoples already living in the land promised to Israel were in bondage to the idolatry, injustice, and curse of Adam’s rebellion. The danger was that Israel would fall into the same idolatrous patterns. Instead of being a light, they might be overcome by the darkness; instead of being distinctive, they might become immersed in the pagan idolatry of their neighbors.

The drama of Israel’s vocation among the nations was to be played out in a very public way. Israel was located at the crossroads of the ancient Near Eastern world and thus in the military crosshairs of the more powerful and established nations surrounding them. They were vulnerable and needed to rely on God’s provision and protection for their survival.

Today it’s common for people to choose their homes based on the view. They want to look out their windows and see something beautiful: ocean or forest, sunset or elegant architecture. When God chooses real estate, he also chooses it for the view—but it is a completely different kind of view. He chose that particular plot of land for Israel so that his people would always be in view of the surrounding nations. Ezekiel writes, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her” (Ezek. 5:5). God placed his people in the sight of the nations like a glass house in Times Square, so that through them, all might see the distinctiveness of God and his law (Deut. 4:8–9). God’s real estate business is missional to the core. Instead of giving his people a good view, he makes *them* the good view, which is a glimpse of the blessing and shalom that comes from God.

If they would choose to obey and live out their calling with faithfulness and justice, the surrounding nations would catch a glimpse of the way the world was intended to be under God’s rule. But if Israel would succumb to the pagan idolatry of the surrounding nations instead and fail to live out their priestly calling as a holy nation, God’s covenant judgment against Israel would be on display to the nations.

Sadly, Israel chooses the path of sin and disobedience. By the end of the book of Judges, God’s people are not flourishing in the land. They are on a

downward spiral into idolatry and injustice. Though they possess a beautiful law, they do not fully obey it and so fail their role in God's mission. Rather than being distinct and holy, they mimic their neighbors; rather than being a light to the nations, they sink into the darkness.

KINGDOM

The book of Judges narrates Israel's descent into apostasy and idolatry. The book ends on a surprising note—with the need for a king (Judg. 21:25). Somehow the author believes that a king might be the means of ending Israel's slide into covenant rebellion. The book of Samuel (which follows Judges) tells how God grants them a king so that they might fulfill their vocation to be a shalomic presence among the nations. Unfortunately Israel wanted the wrong kind of king, one like the leaders of “all the other nations” (1 Sam. 8:5, 20). Though God wanted them to have a king to mediate his rule and to enable Israel to live faithfully under his reign, Israel wanted a king to displace God and fight on their behalf. God grants their wish and gives them Saul. But, unsurprisingly, Saul's reign ends in failure and disgrace.

After Saul, God provides his people with David, a king who is after God's heart (1 Sam. 13:14) and is willing to lead his people into covenant faithfulness by defeating Israel's enemies, centering Israel's life on God's presence in the temple, and enforcing the law. Only under such a faithful king could Israel hope to fulfill their calling.

But even though David is faithful, he is also a man with clay feet, unable to live completely under God's rule himself, let alone able to empower Israel to do so. But God gives David a promise: he will provide Israel with a king who will be able to accomplish what David cannot. This king will rule over a worldwide and everlasting kingdom (2 Sam. 7:11–16). The promise God made to Abraham—that blessing would come first to Israel and then through Israel to the nations—would be fulfilled by a king in David's line. And in the Psalms and Prophets from that point on, Israel's hope is for a king descended from David who will usher in God's own kingdom: “Then all the nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed” (Ps. 72:17).

King David commissions the building of the temple in Jerusalem, and it is eventually built by King Solomon. The temple was symbolic of God's unique covenant and presence with his people, a beautiful place of worship and the centerpiece of Israel's life. But the temple was never intended to be for Israel *alone*: it was to be, one day, a house of prayer for *all* nations (Isa. 56:6–8). God was establishing an island of worship in a sea of idolatry. He was calling

his people to worship the true God in the sight of the nations and to invite those nations to join them (Ps. 67:4; 96:3–10).

Israel's worship wasn't just about performing rituals; it was intended to be a robust engagement with God through lives of public holiness, lives that would display the uniqueness of God's justice and mercy. The prophets boldly condemned the people of Israel when they practiced the rituals of worship while simultaneously practicing idolatry and injustice. God frequently expressed his anger and disgust with Israel when they observed the Sabbath, fasted, and sacrificed meticulously while oppressing the vulnerable. Worship is acceptable to God only when it is accompanied by a life of justice and righteousness (Isa. 1:10–17; 58:6–8; Amos 5:21–24).

The kingdom of Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations and an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6), showing the nations what shalom looks like under the reign of God. But instead of leading Israel to live under the rule of God, the royal descendants of David led the nation to covenant rebellion. The temple, instead of nourishing Israel with worship and sacrifice, became a place of perfunctory practice and false assurance. In order for Israel to fulfill their calling to manifest before the nations what God intended for human life, they needed something much greater: a greater evidence of the presence of God than even the temple; a greater King than even David.

EXILE

Eventually Israel's rebellion brings God's judgment. He raises up pagan nations to conquer them and remove them from the land. They had refused to be a light to the nations, so they were to be scattered among the nations. This judgment happens in two waves. In 722 BC the northern ten tribes (simply called Israel) are scattered by the Assyrians, and in 586 BC the remaining two tribes (called Judah) are conquered and carried off to Babylon in exile. This is a low point in Israel's history.

Because they had refused to serve the true God, they would have to live in a place drowning in idolatry. Because they had refused to be a blessing to others, they would themselves experience the curse of exile. Because they had marginalized the most vulnerable, they would learn to live on the margins. Because they had desecrated the good land, they would now plant gardens in foreign soil. It's hard to overstate the pain, shame, and disillusionment God's people experienced as they stumbled down the road to Babylon.

Life in exile came with hard questions about how God's people should live. Did they still have their vocation? If so, how could they be faithful from

a position of weakness? What did faithfulness look like apart from the overarching guidance of the law? Which aspects of Babylonian culture should be rejected and which should be embraced? What does a missional identity look like under the oppressive rule of a pagan king? How should they relate to their Babylonian neighbors? Israel faced two major temptations in exile. On the one hand, some of God's people were tempted to withdraw from public witness until the exile was over. Like turtles in their shells, they attempted to retain their ways as a disengaged subculture, avoiding contact with Babylonian life. On the other hand, some were tempted to assimilate into Babylonian culture and its idolatrous practices. Like chameleons, they blended in with their surroundings and lost their distinctive missional identity, which was rooted in their covenant relationship with God.

But through the prophet Jeremiah, God shows his people a third way—neither as turtles nor as chameleons—to remain distinct and be a blessing to the nations:

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (Jer. 29:5–7)

Although they are living in an idolatrous and unjust city, God gives them instructions to plant good gardens and build strong families. Doesn't that sound familiar? These are basically the same instructions that he gave to Adam and Eve in the garden. Even though Israel is living in a sin-stained world, they are called to continue to engage in the good culture-making work that was given by God in the garden. Even in exile, God calls them to be hints of hope and conduits of human flourishing.

When Jeremiah mentions the word *welfare* or *peace* in Jeremiah 29:7, he's using the Hebrew word *shalom*. Again, *shalom* refers to a flourishing world of right relationships among God, people, and the nonhuman creation. God's people were called to bear witness to the steadfast love of God by seeking the flourishing of the same people who killed their families and carried them into a foreign land. They were called to seek the good of Babylon even as Jerusalem lay in ruins. They were called to love and bless their most hostile enemies as they cultivated a small plot of God's garden in the heart of the city. They were called to live such distinctly good lives that they provided a taste of God's kingdom amid a buffet of idolatry, oppression, and injustice.

Eventually, the exile comes to an end, the temple is rebuilt, and Jerusalem is reinhabited. However, Jerusalem lacks its original grandeur and suffers under the oppressive authority of occupying powers for generations to come. Israel is still virtually in exile as they live under foreign kings as slaves on the land that God had given them (Neh. 9:36–37).

PROPHETS

Israel had been invited into God’s mission, but they had failed their part. They were intended to be the solution to sin but were part of the problem instead. The word of Israel’s prophets, the visionaries who looked forward to a day of restoration, was their only source of hope. The prophets spoke of a day when God would flood Israel with his presence, replacing war with peace, establishing perfect justice, and renewing all of creation. Wounds would be bound, families would be reconciled, suffering would become a discarded memory, and all nations would gather to participate in the joyful worship of God.

The prophets poetically described a day when lions would dwell with lambs and instruments of war would be refashioned into farming equipment; because there would be no need to engage in war, all people would live together in perfect safety (Isa. 2:4; 11:1–10; Zech. 9:10). The prophets described a shalom of holistic human flourishing that would come when God would restore the blessing for which the world was intended. The prophets expected this peace to come from a unique king, a “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” who would establish a kingdom defined by justice and shalom (Isa. 9:6–7). They expected this peace to be a work of God’s Spirit poured out in power to renew the whole creation.

Of course, God could have bypassed Israel in his continuing mission to establish shalom. After all, he had given them their chance, given them everything they needed to accomplish their mission. But he does not abandon them. God says to Israel, “I am going to act and prove myself holy *through you* so that the nations will know that I am the Lord.” He promises to gather Israel and restore them by cleansing them from their idolatry, giving them new hearts, and putting his Spirit on them. Then Israel’s covenant identity would be restored: God would be their God and they would be his people (Ezek. 36:23–28). Through them, God would fulfill his mission: the nations would be blessed and restored to creational life. God would restore and renew the whole creation and the entirety of human life to what he had always intended. This was the good news that Israel longed for during the time of the prophets (Isa. 52:7–10).

Interlude

Israel waited and waited and waited—for four hundred years. One oppressive empire followed another, finally culminating in Rome, the most cruel of all. But many in Israel kept reading their Scriptures. Their historians promised that blessing would one day fill the earth. Their psalms enabled them to sing with hope that God’s kingdom would one day come. Their prophets filled them with the vision that God would return, rule the earth through his Messiah, and renew the earth by his Spirit. But when? How? And how were they to live until that day?

These questions were answered differently by various factions in Israel, and this often led to conflict, sometimes violent conflict, among them. But in spite of these differences, Israel shared the common belief that their God would return to Israel and act to restore his kingdom there. However, they also shared something much less noble. Under the oppression they had experienced first from Persia, then Greece, and finally from Rome, their prophetic hope had warped into an ethnocentric hatred for their oppressors, and their concept of God’s kingdom transformed into a lust for nationalistic privilege. God would certainly return but *just for Israel*—or worse, just for a specific *faction* within Israel. Israel had lost her sense of missional vocation.

Meanwhile, all Israel waited for God’s story to reach its climax.

Christ

And that climax *does* arrive, but in a way very different from what anyone in Israel could have imagined. Israel had been chosen by God to be the means by which he would deal with the sin of the world and restore creational blessing to his whole creation. Then Jesus comes, *representing* Israel, taking their vocation on himself and fulfilling it. But he does so in a very unexpected way.

Jesus seizes the primary image of Israel’s hope: the kingdom of God. When Israel had imagined the kingdom, they thought God would destroy the pagan kingdoms that stood in opposition to him and restore his own righteous rule (Dan. 7:1–14). This powerful work of God by the Spirit in the Son of David was, they believed, to take place at the very end of history. But when Jesus comes, he announces that the kingdom of God has arrived *already* (Matt. 4:17, 23; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 4:43). “The restoration of creational blessing and shalom is present in me,” Jesus says. The end-time salvation had arrived.

The salvation Jesus announces is comprehensive. Luke, for example, speaks of a salvation in which humanity is restored to God and to just relationships among themselves. Salvation is demonstrated in the mighty acts of Jesus. Here we have a window into the new creation (Luke 7:20–22). Salvation is

forgiveness of sins (religious), liberation from demonic power (spiritual), restoration of the marginalized and ostracized (social), justice for the poor and food for the hungry (economic), liberation from political oppression (political), the end of natural disasters (natural), and healing of the body (physical). Salvation turns back and erases all the evil consequences of human rebellion against God.

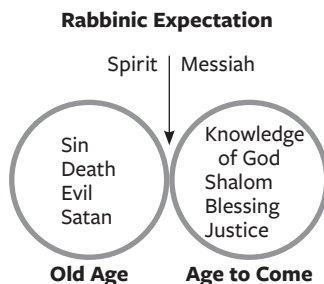
Yet as Jesus was proclaiming the arrival of God’s kingdom, the evidence of sin and evil remained. What sense did it make to say that the kingdom of God was present already (Matt. 12:28)?

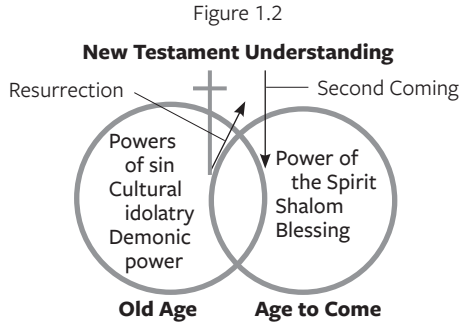
Many within Israel wrestled with that same question. Israel understood history (based on the teaching of their rabbinic scholars) as two ages: the old age and the age to come. The old age (introduced by the sin of Adam) is dominated by evil, death, and suffering. The age to come, ushered in by the Messiah in the power of the Spirit, would erase all evil, death, and suffering and restore creational blessing (see fig. 1.1).

Even Jesus’s own followers had trouble understanding how Jesus could be the expected one while the evil of the old age remained (Luke 7:18–23). To explain, Jesus offered insight into the nature of the kingdom through parables (Matt. 13), and his teaching would come more fully into focus after the Spirit was given at Pentecost (Acts 2). The post-resurrection picture offered by the New Testament writers is that, indeed, the kingdom *has* come, ushered in by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God’s power to heal and renew has been unleashed. But the evil powers of the old age remain. The two ages overlap: the power of the Spirit to restore blessing and shalom is already present in the world, but sin, demonic powers, and cultural idolatry remain as well (see fig. 1.2).

Why is the final coming of the kingdom delayed? The Gospels provide an answer: so that Jesus might gather Israel with the hope of gathering the nations in the future. And so, in his early ministry, Jesus begins to gather a community to inherit the kingdom (Matt. 21:43; Luke 12:32). He is the shepherd of the

Figure 1.1





end-time, promised in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and other prophets to gather the lost sheep of Israel and restore them so that they might fulfill their vocation (Jer. 23:3; 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–31; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 9:16; Matt. 15:24). The kingdom comes to this gathered disciple community as both gift and task. They take on the mission of Israel to be a light to the nations (Matt. 5:13–16). Jesus challenges the ethnocentric hatred within Israel and restores his little flock, now the true Israel, to a mission of suffering love for the nations, including those who hate them (Matt. 5–7). They are to make known the blessed and shalomic life of the kingdom made present in Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

The climactic events in the arrival of the kingdom of God are the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the death of Jesus, the sin, suffering, and evil of the old age were defeated. In the resurrection, the age to come was inaugurated. The death and resurrection are cosmic events: turning points in world history. They settled the goal of history; the resurrection life began in Jesus and will one day fill the earth. But until that day, the gathered and restored community is sent to every part of the world to make known the good news: God reigns victorious, and his gracious rule will one day cover the earth.

The Gospels end with Jesus sending his newly gathered and restored “Israel” to the nations. Against all expectations, it will not be a glorious kingdom established in Jerusalem that draws the nations of the earth but a sent people in whom Christ dwells by his Spirit. This sent community is the gathered and restored community of Israel. But as they go to the nations, the kingdom will take on more of a gentile shape. Jesus’s mission of gathering will continue in this new era in history until he returns to complete the work he began.

The Church

We have been listening to God’s symphony of mission, waiting our turn to play our part. That symphony moved through Israel to Jesus. Israel’s mission

to bear the promise of God's ultimate purpose for the whole world was fulfilled in Jesus's mission. But there is still more music to hear before we can take up our own instruments. Jesus handed off his mission to his newly gathered and restored community, inviting them to continue what he had been doing in Israel, to extend it to the ends of the earth. We cannot immediately jump from Jesus to our own part. The New Testament offers about a century of mission history in which the early church faithfully carried out its mission. Together with the mission of Jesus and the mission of Israel, the mission of the early church demonstrates the trajectory that leads us to God's ultimate purpose for creation.

Jesus confined himself to the lost sheep of Israel, but his completed work meant that blessing could extend to *all* nations. The New Testament makes clear that this new covenant community continues the mission not only of Jesus (John 20:21) but also of Israel (1 Pet. 2:9–10). Whereas Israel bore the *promise* of God's purpose for the world, the people of God today bear a *foretaste* of God's purpose for the world. The *promise* was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because the Spirit has been given, the church has become a *foretaste* of new life and now bears it in every part of the world for the sake of all nations.

Shortly after his resurrection, Jesus spent over a month with his new disciple community, but they were still confused. He appeared to them as the Resurrected One and talked with them about the coming of the Spirit and the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1–5). In Israel's vocabulary the words *resurrection*, *Spirit*, and *kingdom of God* meant the end was about to dawn. So the disciples asked the most obvious question in the world: "Now you will restore the kingdom to Israel, right?" The answer to that question set the stage for the continuing mission of God's people until the end of the age (Acts 1:6–8).

In a nutshell, Jesus's answer was, "Yes, the kingdom *is* come—but in a way you never expected!" Jesus then articulated his agenda. First, the ultimate end would continue to be held off (Acts 1:7). Second, the Spirit would be given as a foretaste, down payment, and firstfruits of end-time shalom. The power of God's ultimate salvation would be given *already* in a provisional way in the midst of history. Third, this gift of salvation would constitute his followers' very identity as a witnessing community. "You *will be* my witnesses" was not a command but a declaration of fact. Having received a foretaste of the coming salvation, they would thereafter witness to it with their lives, and that witness would overflow into words and deeds that also pointed to what Jesus accomplished. And finally, this witness would begin in Jerusalem and move to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

While all of this sounds quite familiar to us, it would have been astonishing to those early followers of Jesus. The words of Jesus changed the shape of the mission of God's people; the music of his symphony modulated into a different key.

The mission remained in Jerusalem for a short time as Jews were invited and gathered into the new covenant community. But gradually it moved outward, and gentiles were added. Soon the church was predominantly gentile, and the change in the composition of God's people was becoming clear. This change raised concern among Jesus's earliest followers. For thousands of years, God's people had been an ethnically Jewish people, unified by their place on one piece of land; now they were becoming a multiethnic and nongeographical entity. For fifteen hundred years the law had shaped the religious, cultural, political, economic, and communal lives of God's people; now they were to live under the laws of others, laws shaped by pagan idolatry. Many Jewish Christians simply were not ready for such a radical change. The ensuing controversy led to a council in Jerusalem where it was affirmed that God's people would take many cultural forms in the various cultural settings of the world (Acts 15). Somehow God's people needed to live faithfully in every dimension of their lives—including the social, economic, and political dimensions—within cultures organized to serve gods other than the Lord God. This was incomprehensible to Jewish believers at the time, and only when we feel this fully justifiable incomprehensibility can we understand the painful tension that we ourselves must live with in the idolatrous cultures in which *we* are set.

We might ask how the church was so faithful in its mission in that first century. The first answer Luke gives is that it had an *attractive life* of generosity, justice, mercy, joy, and power—and that this was the most powerful witness to the kingdom (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–35; 11:19–29). But added to this distinctive life were the church's *words* of witness (Acts 4:32–35). It is not possible to separate the two, for it was the church's *life* that made its verbal testimony so compelling. Other places in Acts also show that the witness of life led to the witness in word. But if the church was to be faithful to Jesus's mandate, its mission of witness needed to extend “to the ends of the earth.” So where Christian communities were not already established to make the good news known, the church sent out some of their own to be off-site witnesses. Paul and Barnabas, and then Paul and Silas, were sent off to plant new witnessing communities. When their initial work was done in each of these new places, the people of the newly planted church were left to be the witnesses for that area.

One more important point needs to be made about the communal life of the church as witness. Today, “church” can refer to a private body in which certain

religious practices take place. But the word *church* (*ekklēsia* in Greek) was chosen for the early believers precisely because it identified them as a *public* body. The church was the beginning of that new humankind that would one day fill the earth. The church is God’s people living as God intends across the whole spectrum of their lives. Thus, we see the church gathered on Sundays to renew their lives by the Spirit, to live the life of the kingdom more and more. Then, Monday to Saturday, the same church is scattered throughout its members’ various vocations, bearing witness to the lordship of Jesus in all the places its members find themselves. Lesslie Newbigin puts it this way:

Is it not an illusion that constantly fogs our thinking about the Church that we think of it as something which exists manifestly on Sunday, is in a kind of state of suspended animation from Monday to Saturday? The truth of course is that the Church exists in its prime reality from Monday to Saturday, in all its members, dispersed throughout the fields and homes and offices and factories, bearing the royal priesthood of Christ into every corner of His world. On the Lord’s day it is withdrawn into itself to renew its being in the Lord Himself.³

The apostle Peter urges the individuals who make up the church to take up their callings in public life as a witness to the gospel (1 Pet. 2:8–17). He speaks of being holy “in all you do” (1:15) and of a “way of life”⁴ and “good works”⁵ in the public square. Christians were to participate in all aspects of their cultural lives distinctively because they were aliens to the idolatry of the Roman Empire, living out a different story.

The book of Acts ends on a somewhat strange note. A fast-paced, gripping narrative seems simply to grind to a halt with an anticlimactic ending. Yet this ending is purposeful: Luke is using a literary technique to say that the story he has been telling is not over. He invites his readers to participate in what God is doing and tacitly challenges us to find *our* places in the continuing story.

Consummation

The day is coming when God’s mission of restoration will be complete. The apostle Peter describes this day as the future *restoration of all things*: “Heaven must receive him [Jesus] until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21).

3. Lesslie Newbigin, “Bible Studies: Four Talks on 1 Peter,” in *We Were Brought Together*, ed. David M. Taylor (Sydney: Australian Council for the World Council of Churches, 1960), 96–97.

4. Six times Peter speaks of a way of life (1:15, 18; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16).

5. Six times Peter speaks of good works (as a verb: 2:15, 20; 3:6, 17; as an adjective: 2:14; as a noun: 4:19).

The prophets he refers to had described a coming restoration and the mending of all that was broken. The prophets pointed to a day when God himself would reign over all nations, bringing a final peace through his power, lifting up the oppressed, humbling all oppressors, and remaking the world in perfect shalom. War, terrorism, racism, hunger, and genocide would all vanish under God's peace. In Isaiah 65, we see a vision of the new heaven and new earth as a place of joy instead of tears (vv. 18–19), life instead of death (v. 20), homes instead of homelessness (vv. 21–22), productive work instead of wearisome toil (v. 22), blessing instead of the curse (v. 23), the attentive presence of God instead of his absence (v. 24), and safety instead of danger (v. 25).

We don't know exactly what this new heaven and new earth will look like. But the final chapters of the book of Revelation invoke this vision again in a glimpse of what's coming when Christ returns. Heaven and earth reunite, and the presence of God repairs all that is broken and restores all that was lost in the fall.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." (Rev. 21:3–5)

This is a description of complete and final restoration. Notice that this passage doesn't say God is making all *new things*; it says that he's making all *things new*. This wording is important; it's the difference between replacement and restoration. God isn't throwing his creation in the dumpster; he's pulling it out of the recycling bin. Describing this future restoration, Al Wolters says, "God does not make junk, and we dishonor the creator if we take a negative view of the work of his hands when he himself takes such a positive view. In fact, so positive a view did God take of what he had created that he refused to scrap it when mankind spoiled it, but determined instead, at the cost of his Son's life, to make it new and good again. God does not make junk, and he does not junk what he has made."⁶

The rebellion of humanity brought pain and misery to the world. In Revelation we see that a day is coming when idolatry will be replaced by a palpable sense of God's presence. The hands that once carved false gods out of wood

6. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 42.

will be lifted in praise to the One who is on the throne. Wounds will be healed and tears wiped away. Graveyards will become monuments to life, hospitals will be repurposed as playgrounds, and Band-Aids will become stickers that remind children of the God who heals the nations. Former enemies who once lobbed insults like bombs will become reconciled friends who craft encouraging words with poetic eloquence. Warring nations will find peace under the reign of their true King, replacing weapons of war with instruments of worship and clenched fists with hands of friendship.

Participating in the Symphony of Mission

What does this story mean for us? Where is our place in God's mission? When we listen carefully to each development in Scripture, we hear a story about God's mission of reconciliation, a beautiful symphony where God recovers every aspect of life and restores it to the original harmony for which it was made. This mission has been accomplished through the work of Christ. However, we are called to be more than spectators. We are to be the orchestra through which he brings the music of the gospel to the listening world, each of us an instrument created for specific contributions to the overall harmony.

Just as God formed the nation of Israel to be his instrument of mission, Jesus assembles the church as his instrument of reconciliation in the world. When the apostle Paul uses the language of "reconciliation," he describes what God is doing not only *for* us but *through* us. We are reconciled to God in Christ; we become a new creation and then are commissioned to *join* his work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17–19). Paul describes us as being "ambassadors" on behalf of our reconciling God (5:20). We don't fully establish the kingdom, but we do build embassies (outposts of flourishing) in a world of spiritual idolatry, social injustice, and physical curses. We are called to scatter into our neighborhoods and workplaces to provide a foretaste of the future shalom that Jesus will fully establish when he returns. This means that our participation in God's mission should promote the spiritual, social, and physical reconciliations implicit in the gospel.

We have a mission to pursue humanity's reconciliation to God. God is speaking to the world, offering peace and forgiveness, appealing to people to turn from the idols that enslave them and turn instead to the God who offers true freedom. God is the one who speaks these words of invitation and reconciliation, but he chooses to speak through *our* mouths (2 Cor. 5:20). Therefore, we participate in God's mission by proclaiming the gospel in words and pointing people to Christ, the one who reconciles us to the Father through

his life, death, and resurrection. Because of our commitment to being God's ambassadors of spiritual reconciliation, we should value preaching, evangelism, counseling, Bible translation, and the many types of ministry that use language to urge people to be reconciled to God.

As ambassadors of peace, we are to provide the world with a glimpse of the kingdom by promoting peace in our communities (Rom. 12:17–21). However, this is not to be a shallow peace that glosses over injustice. We are called instead to exercise a holistic kind of love for our neighbors, a love that considers the fullness of their lives as well as the systems that harm them. We are called to bear witness to the future social flourishing of the kingdom by working for our neighbors' flourishing now, both in our interpersonal relationships and in our engagement with society. Because of our commitment to being God's ambassadors of social reconciliation, we should value the many aspects of mission that promote the flourishing of society and our relationships with one another—from peacemaking to policy making, from welcoming refugees to protecting the unborn, from the hospitality of the dinner table to the diplomacy of the negotiating table.

We have a mission also to pursue reconciliation between humanity and the nonhuman creation. Our world is suffering greatly beneath the weight of a worldview that exalts humanity to the place where it dominates the earth for its own benefit. Our mission is to struggle toward a reconciliation that brings care and stewardship to the nonhuman creation as well as compassionate care for the suffering of human beings. In the Gospels we clearly see that Jesus in his earthly ministry pushed back against the physical effects of the fall. He restored sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. He healed disease, fed the hungry, and conquered death by raising Lazarus from the grave. The day is coming when physical death and pain will be no more. In the meantime, as God's people, we are called to bear witness to the future fullness of the kingdom by meeting the physical needs of our neighbors. Because of our commitment to being God's ambassadors of reconciliation, we should value the many aspects of mission that address physical needs, such as providing housing for those who are homeless, employment for those who need work, food for the hungry, and art for a world in need of wonder.

If God's mission is indeed to reconcile all that was broken through the fall and to restore shalom to creation, then our participation in that mission should be as broad as the world's brokenness. As witnesses to the full gospel of Christ, we are called to engage all of life for the glory of God and the good of our neighbors.