



FLOW #1: THE RETURN OF THE KING

Jeremiah 29:4-14, Mark 16:1-8, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 51-58

Near the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam the hobbit awakens on an Easter-like day. His dreams have come true. Against all odds, he and Frodo had succeeded in destroying the evil ring. Sauron and the forces of Mordor had been defeated. And now he awakens in the safekeeping of good King Aragorn, in the presence of Gandalf, whom he had previously given up for dead. And Gandalf says: ‘Well, Master Samwise, how do you feel?’

"But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: ‘Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. *Is everything sad going to come untrue?*’"

Sam’s question is much, much bigger than simply, “Will *my* story have a happy ending?” Sam is rather asking about the story of the whole world. Is everything sad—everything sad in the whole wide world going to come untrue? Yes, and in our world, Easter marks the beginning of it. Easter is the turning point in history, the first day of spring for all creation. On the first Easter morning many years ago, the whole world awakened to a new and unexpected horizon. Jesus had risen from the dead. The ice and snow of our eternal winter of death was finally beginning to thaw, as God was fulfilling his promise of making all things new!

My uncle died Thursday, and my family and I have grieved his death this past week. I know so many of you lost loved ones this past year. Others are suffering with severe illness, or depression, or loneliness, or infertility, or broken relationships, or something else. What is your current darkness? Your eternal winter? God knows what’s weighing on your heart. Yet our present suffering isn’t the last chapter of the story. Everything sad will come untrue. Christ is risen, just as he said, and he shall reign forever and ever! Through his reign everything sad will come untrue.

But how? How will our broken world be set right again? In *The Lord of the Rings*, after Sam asks, “Is everything sad going to come untrue?”—which for most authors would have been a good place to end the story—there’s still some 100 pages to go! In the rest of the story, even though their greatest enemy is defeated, Sam and the other hobbits still have work to do. Everything sad begins to come untrue as Sam and the others set to work bringing order to the kingdom.

It’s the same for Christians. For the next 7 weeks, we’re going to think together about the calling of resurrection life, asking the question, “What is salvation actually for?” Each week in our community groups, we’ll be watching a series of short films called *For the Life of the World*. These films are all about how everything sad will come untrue in our world, and the role King Jesus invites us to play in making it so. And it all begins with Easter. Let’s have a look together.

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CHRIST IS RISEN, SO LET'S JOIN HIM IN HIS WORK

Everything sad *is* going to come untrue. It's already happening. It started with the first Easter and is continuing to this very day, as Jesus invites us to join him in his work. Let me show you what the Bible says about this.

First, there are four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke & John—and all four Gospels end with Easter stories. All four of these Easter stories share the same essential elements: the fact of Jesus' resurrection, and a call to respond to Jesus' resurrection.

- **The fact of Jesus' resurrection.** In all four Gospels, the angels at the tomb, and Jesus in his various appearances, are matter-of-fact about what has happened: “Christ is risen, just as he told you beforehand.” Of course it happened! And the fact of the resurrection is no mere historical detail (e.g. some forgotten battle in the 100 years war). It has tremendous and immediate consequences (eg. the defeat of Sauron). It means that God has won. Sin, death and the devil have been defeated. God is making everything sad come untrue.
- **The call to respond to Jesus' resurrection.** As the first Christians realize that Jesus has risen from the dead, they drop everything and respond. They can't wait to get to work, telling the world. At first they're somewhat timid, e.g. in Mark's account, but after Pentecost, when they're filled with the HS, they give their lives to the work of the Lord. **E.g. Peter's cowardice before Easter, and his courage after Pentecost.** The only way to explain this transformation is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The same essential elements are found in the Apostle Paul's account of Easter in 1 Cor 15:

- The fact of Jesus' resurrection. E.g. Jesus appeared to 500+ witnesses (15:6). “Of course Jesus rose from the dead! Everybody saw him, even me!”
- Then, after a lengthy meditation on how Easter guarantees that everything sad will become untrue, Paul ends the chapter with the call to respond to Jesus' resurrection. “Therefore, my beloved brothers & sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” 1 Cor 15:58. This verse is the foundational idea for everything we'll be talking about over the next seven weeks. It's like all the adventures of Sam and the other hobbits after the ring was destroyed. Just as they set to work bringing order to Aragorn's kingdom, we are called to join in the work of the risen Lord Jesus.¹

¹ We follow this same framework weekly when we meet together for worship. First, we gather because of the fact of Jesus' resurrection. It's made explicit throughout the liturgy, and in the Creed, and at the benediction (“All our hopes we set on the risen Christ”). Second, we respond to Jesus' resurrection each week in the dismissal, by agreeing together to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

WHY ARE WE HERE? FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

But *how* are we to join in the work of the Lord? Christians of most every denomination agree that there's work to do out in the world. But what is it that we're supposed to be doing? The world is so broken, and dangerous and scary. There's so much animosity towards Christians that instead of going in peace to love and serve the Lord, **we're often tempted to go out into the world with urgency and fear.** For example:

- Sometimes we want to hide from the world through **fortification**. Build up the walls and create an alternative Christian culture and economy within, as we await the return of Christ any minute now. We're in a race to create our own music and movies and schools and neighborhoods and clothing before we become contaminated by our broken world. We can shut them out, because it's us vs. them. They won't listen to us, and so who needs them?
- Sometimes we want to conquer the world through **domination**. Let's take back our government and our schools and our media and our neighborhoods, and let's do it quickly, before any further damage is done to our nation. *They* have been oppressing *us* for too long. Let's take back control, because we know what's best for everybody.
- Sometimes we want to blend into the world through **accommodation**. We're so tired of other Christians having this "us vs. them" mentality. Let's not allow another day to pass in which our faith is somehow offensive to someone else. Why can't today be the day that we begin afresh by simply loving everyone and getting along? Paul said that we should become all things to all people, so why not go all the way? If God is making everything sad untrue, then why should we be offensive or different? If God is really sovereign, then what harm is there in our becoming the "church of anything goes?"

Even though all these approaches are wrong-headed, none of them is surprising. They all stem from a fundamental tension for Christians: we're citizens of God's Kingdom, but we still live as exiles in the fallen Kingdom of man. Because we feel out of place, we often react out of urgency and fear, with either fortification, domination, or accommodation.

But there's an alternative way to join in the work of the Lord, one that isn't reacting out of urgency and fear. It's this: we put down roots here as exiles, as expatriates, and we live for the Life of the World as loyal subjects of the King. I want to show you how this way overcomes urgency with patience, and overcomes fear with love. But first we need to recognize and embrace our situation here as exiles.

EMBRACE EXILE

Jer 29 is a letter to Jews who had been exiled in Babylon. Why were they exiled? Because they had become accommodationists. They had so blended into the world that they were no longer any different from the world. They had failed in their mission to be a light to the nations. So, in a sense, their exile was sacramental. It was an outward, visible sign of the spiritual reality of their separation from God.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews had long before returned from Babylon to the land of Israel. But they still lived in exile, because they were still estranged from God. Exile was clear not only from the Roman occupation, but also from the wicked, self-serving, unjust, exploitative regime of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem who, like the Romans, were estranged from God. The Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, had foretold the end of the exile not simply with a return to the land of Israel, or with the rebuilding the temple, but when God came to live with his people, like it had been in the beginning in the Garden of Eden.² That's when there would no longer be any separation between them and God.

Jesus, God's only Son, willingly chose exile for the life of the world. He left his home with his Father in order to live among us in our broken world. And wherever he went, he welcomed in refugees: men and women, Jews and Gentiles, zealots and Pharisees, tax collectors and prostitutes. But he didn't stop there. On Good Friday he died for the life of the world, taking our sins upon himself and experiencing full and complete alienation from God. Then on Easter, God vindicated his Son by bringing him back from the dead, and crowning him King. Now King Jesus is making everything sad come untrue by delivering all creation from exile.³

As Christians, exile is the reason we still feel unsettled in the world. On the one hand, our spiritual exile is over because we're reconciled to God and adopted into his family. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is with us wherever we go, whether the developing world, a secular school, a hostile work environment, etc. On the other hand, we still live in a broken world. Temptation, sin, crime, disease, and death are a constant reality. This is why we feel tension every Sunday when we *go in peace to love and serve the Lord*. We're going back out into foreign territory. Until God makes all things new, we won't ever feel completely at home in the world.

² The prophets who look ahead to the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple see in this event the refounding of the Garden of Eden; Ezekiel envisages rivers flowing out to water and heal the rest of the world, Zephaniah imagines the nations looking on in admiration as YHWH restores the fortunes of his people, and Zechariah (who imitates Ezekiel's idea of the rivers) sees the restoration of Jerusalem as the signal for YHWH to become king over all the world, so that the nations will come to Jerusalem to keep the Jewish festivals. Thus, in the literature which urged the exiled people to look forward to the coming age when all would be restored, the future glory of the land is described in terms borrowed from paradise-imagery; Israel after restoration will be like a new creation, with the people once again being fruitful and multiplying in her own land. The picture is the same: Israel is to be the true people of the one God, whose fortunes are the key to those of the whole world. NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 264.

³ Jesus 'regarded himself as the one who summed up Israel's vocation and destiny in himself. He was the one in and through whom the real "return from exile" would come about, indeed, was already coming about. He was the Messiah.' NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 517.

LIVING FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

Now let's talk about how to live for the life of the world as loyal subjects of King Jesus. In his letter to the Babylonian exiles, Jeremiah outlined how to do this.

[Jer 29:4-5] Settle down. Build houses. Plant gardens, and eat the produce. As Jesus' loyal subjects, we are to be good stewards of whatever the Lord has put under our care, just as Adam and Eve were once called to be good stewards of God's royal garden. For some of us this means literally owning real estate and growing food. For all of us, it means taking stock of whatever resources God has given us in terms of relationships, education, experiences, jobs, opportunities, and so on, and then stewarding them in such a way that whatever God has entrusted into our care will flourish and bear fruit. Care for whatever God has given you. In the first film in the FLOW series, there's the idea of an orchestra illustrating how all of our different responsibilities blend together. As each of you is wisely governing what God has entrusted into your care, you're making a beautiful song that gives glory to the Lord. As people hear it and ask you about the song you're singing, you can invite them into our community, where the song is much more beautiful, because together it is filled with exquisite harmonies, sung to King Jesus for the life of the world.

Then [Jer 29:6]. As you steward whatever God has entrusted to you, you will need helpers. This is the call to *multiplication*. "Increase in number; do not decrease." God is not telling them to give their sons and daughters in marriage to the Babylonians. The earth is already filled with rebels who don't know God, particularly in a place like Babylon. Rather, this is a call to multiply god-fearing stewards and raise up more image-bearers for the Lord.

In short, Jeremiah reiterates what God commanded of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen 1:28). "Now that you find yourselves in Babylon, far east of Eden, don't think that your job description has changed. Your responsibilities in exile are the same as they were in Eden."

Take the long view. Now let's think about what's different about this way of living for the life of the world. How does this approach overcome urgency with patience? It takes the long view. Prior to the Babylonian exile, there were false prophets in Jerusalem who promised prosperity instead of exile. After the Babylonian conquest, these same false prophets said, "Not to worry. You'll be back in two years." Jeremiah said in [29:8-9], "Do not listen to them. They are lying. You will not be in Babylon for only 2 years. Rather, [29:10]—70 years!" This is God's design [29:11-14] 'to prosper and not harm you.' And just to prove the point, Jeremiah bought a deed to a piece of property in Jerusalem, and he buried it, knowing that he would not live to enjoy it. It would only be in the lifetime of his grandchildren that his family would begin to benefit from it.

Jeremiah's patient, long-term approach is a very different way of thinking than the urgency of most Christian activism today. Settle down, plant, invest, build, grow, tend, maintain, and expand such that whatever God has entrusted into your care will flourish and bear fruit. We all know how to handle a short-term assignment to an unpleasant place. Just take your necessities, get in, and get out. But everything changes when the assignment becomes long-term. You begin to make friends and buy furniture and hang pictures on the walls, in order to make a home there. That's what Jeremiah was saying.

Jeremiah's patient, long-term approach has the advantage of taking the weight of the world off of our own shoulders and putting it back where it belongs, as the responsibility of King Jesus. We confidently believe that he is making everything sad come untrue. Indeed, look at what he's already done: hospitals and schools and the abolition of the slave trade and protection for women and children and so many other advances that have come.

At the same time, Jeremiah's patient, long-term approach is a more realistic way of envisioning how God is making everything sad come untrue. It's happening, but it's happening in fits and starts, often two steps forward one step back. Furthermore, it's almost always at a cost to God's people. It's no coincidence that in most every case, whenever and wherever real change has taken place, it has been through some kind of Christian suffering, whether through persecution, or through people saying no to their own wanderlust, refusing to choose a better house, better job, better spouse, etc., and instead staying put and suffering in some way for the life of the world. The advances of God's kingdom never come easily.

As a church family on Capitol Hill, I long for Jeremiah's patient, long-term approach to become engrained into our heads and hearts. Far too many churches view our Father's world with such pessimism and despair. I want Rez to be known as a community of optimism and hope for what God is doing now, and will continue to do in the generations to come. May the seeds we plant today bear fruit in the lives of our children's children!

Love > Fear. So Jeremiah's approach overcomes urgency with patience. It also overcomes fear with love. I don't know why King Jesus is taking so long to make everything sad come untrue. But there's one clear benefit: God's grace is still available to those who remain estranged from him. And instead of being afraid of unbelievers, we can love them, because we know what it's like to be exiles. Having lived as aliens and strangers in this world, we're able to love and empathize with people who are currently experiencing a spiritual exile from God. Ps 68:6 says, God sets the lonely in families. Having experienced the hospitality of the Gospel ourselves, we can extend that hospitality to everyone, for the life of the world.

In Babylon, the Jewish exiles who received Jeremiah's letter had to overcome their fear and begin to love their Babylonian neighbors. As the exiles built houses and planted gardens, they had to leave their refugee camp and go talk with the Babylonians down at the public market. They needed advice and supplies from the locals. It's the same for us. We simply cannot be "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" without our unbelieving neighbors—people of every faith and lifestyle and persuasion under the sun. They know something about building houses and planting gardens here. We can learn from them in humility.

But we mustn't *use* them. Tim Keller describes the mindset of many churches in North America as one of *using* the city to support the church. Come, city of Washington, buy from our bake sales because we're a worthy cause. But because we love our neighbors, our mindset should be the opposite. Instead of using the city to benefit the church, we ought to rather use the church to benefit the city. Who are we? We're a Gospel-centered Anglican church family *serving* Washington, DC. What's our mission? To love God and *serve* our city as a growing community of disciples. Rather than existing for the life of ourselves, we exist for the life of the world.

But the world is a scary and dangerous place. How do we overcome our fear of the world? One of my jobs as dad in our family is teaching my kids how to take risks. I go out for a swim in the scary ocean in order to show the kids how to do it. I go headfirst down the scary ski slope to show the kids how to do it. etc. In a similar way, that's what Jesus has done for us. Everything sad is coming untrue because Jesus went first. He pioneered missionary risk-taking, pitching his tent in a scary place, for the life of the world. He made a "safe" path for us to follow. Jesus pioneered taking up his cross for the life of the world. We can take up our own crosses and follow him, because of the vindication of Easter. Because Jesus rose from the dead, we too shall rise. So whatever the risk, our future is certain. Jesus poured out his Holy Spirit upon us, so that we might have the courage to follow him anywhere.

Conclusion

So what is salvation actually *for*? We're a part of God's grand plan making everything sad in the world come untrue. Christ is risen! No more urgency—only patience. Christ is risen! No more fear—only love, as we join the risen Lord Jesus in the work of establishing the kingdom come.

“Therefore, my beloved brothers & sisters, [because of the certainty of Jesus' resurrection,] be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” 1 Cor 15:58.