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## CHAPTER 1

# ADAM

**M**y first years in the ministry were trying times for me spiritually. I struggled to understand the importance of a comprehensive picture of missional engagement. I believe this was due in part to my failure to fully understand the biblical framework of missional engagement. As I got older and was discipled, I began to learn that the entire Bible was God's missional plan to redeem lost humanity. As I turned to the Scriptures, the centrality of this component to missional engagement suddenly leapt off of the page. Everything changed in how I engaged the block when I understood Genesis 3 in light of the mission of God.

Missions began in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command. Adam and his wife ate of the one fruit that God forbade them to eat, and in that began the cataclysmic fall of all mankind that would come after them. What a tragedy! The picture here is Adam having full reign of the King's garden, an overabundance of food provided by God, and yet stealing from the tree he was not permitted to eat from. In this definitive act of disobedience Adam commits high treason against the King—an

act punishable by death for him and all his offspring.

At this very moment in history, Adam is in need of a Redeemer. In the midst of Adam's sin, God initiates contact with him. It is important to notice that after Adam sins against God, he doesn't come running to God in confession, but God comes to Adam. God sets a plan in place for his redemption. Even in pronouncing judgment and the curse, God graciously provides redemption in His promise to bring forth a Messiah. God announces the plan to the serpent in Genesis 3:14–15:

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."

This proclamation is what is called the protoevangelium, meaning the first (*proto*) message of salvation (*evangelium*). Genesis 3:15 was the first promise to Adam that God would send a Messiah and save His people. Instead of destroying him, God has made a way for man to be restored through God's means. The means was that God would raise up His own Son to be a sacrifice. Jesus, the Son of God, would be a propitiation for man's sin and rebellion. It would be imbedded in His nature—in His very DNA.

The head of the serpent would be crushed. We know that it could not be accomplished by any like Adam who have been subjected to sin. It would take someone blameless and fully righteous before God to conquer Satan. God tells Adam that such a

man would come—and indeed He did come: Christ, fully man and fully God. Jesus, the Son of God, would crush the head of the serpent!

In this passage from Genesis 3, God is the one who first reaches out to Adam. God is the first apostle, sent of His own initiation, to save His people. God is the first Missionary to step into man's problems and offer His peace and presence. God is the first Evangelist. He engages Adam missionally, first with a clear decree of his downfall and destruction based on his sin, and second with a promise that an offspring would come who would right this wrong.

We must remember that when we express the gospel, we are merely repeating the words of our Lord. We are mirroring His proactive engagement with the gospel, which began as soon as man fell. God didn't waste time: man sinned and God sent a message of redemption.

God sent Himself to engage sinful man. Therefore, we must also follow the call to go to the lost people on the block. Based on God's example to us, our missional engagement must be an active, intentional engagement with the world. The world that is in need of the message of hope, the gospel, and the man of hope, Jesus! This message of hope can't just be relegated to a chosen group of people (insiders), but mainly people outside of Christ. I like to call this living "sent-lives." The church must understand its *sentness*, and how *sentness* flows from and out of the implications of the Great Commission. As we seek to obey and apply the work of the Great Commission, we find that every Christ follower is commanded in Scripture to a life of being a missionary who initiates contact with the lost world. This is what God did in the garden, and this is what we must do in our cities.



## CHAPTER 2

# NEHEMIAH

**P**ut simply: the book of Nehemiah is a snapshot of the biblical reality that people need to be restored before the city can be rebuilt. It is a construction plan to rebuild the brokenness of the whole city—its people, families, property, and government structures. Nehemiah recognized through God’s direction that the people themselves had to be changed first before Jerusalem could be fixed. If we want to rebuild our cities, then we need to heed Nehemiah’s example. A city without transformed people will eventually come crumbling down. Nehemiah’s work foreshadows Christ’s work of transforming hearts so that changed people can be used to rebuild the surrounding world.

The book of Nehemiah takes place after the Babylonians attacked the Israelites and destroyed the wall that enclosed Jerusalem. This humiliating defeat made God’s people incredibly vulnerable; Proverbs 25:28 uses the image of an unwallied city to suggest utter ruin. The Babylonians—an idol-worshipping army—had entered Jerusalem and its holy temple, torn down its fortifications, burned the gates, and hauled many of God’s own people into exile

and slavery. Life in Jerusalem was no longer secure.

The book of Lamentations tells us that God's people were devastated and God's name was disgraced among the surrounding countries. Brokenness became the status quo for 141 years. God's people could not worship together, and the handful who

remained lived in shame and poverty. The situation seemed hopeless. It starts with Nehemiah hearing about Jerusalem's devastation. He was living in the Persian capital city as a high-ranking servant of the king. His job as cupbearer to the king meant that he sampled the monarch's drink and food to check

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**A city without transformed people will eventually come crumbling down.**

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for poison (perhaps the closest modern equivalent is our Secret Service). Although Jerusalem had now been a devastated city for generations, God uses that meeting to radically transform Nehemiah's heart and life, and through him the state of the city.

## NEHEMIAH SAW THE HURT

Nehemiah saw the brokenness of his city and his people, and it caused him to weep, fast, and pray for three or four months. He realized that the fractured state of everything was not the way it was supposed to be. As we live on city blocks, we encounter systems that are broken and devastated, but because things have been that way for a long time—almost 150 years in Nehemiah's case—it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that this is normal; it's the way that things always have been and it's the way that they always will be.

Like Nehemiah, we need to grieve. Nehemiah's desire to

change his people's destitution began with an emotional change of heart. He asked with compassion about the condition of Jerusalem and his people and learned that the people were shamed, the buildings crumbling, and the city was wrecked. It used to be fly and now it was just a hot mess.

In cities across the globe there are buildings and areas in disrepair, ruined and dilapidated. Broken piles of bricks are still there, never cleared away or rebuilt. Are we content to simply sit at a distance as silent observers?

Nehemiah embraced his new perspective by launching into a prolonged season of prayer. He looked out at the conditions but did not find much reason for hope. We do the same in the cities we all serve across this country and the world. At the time this book was written, Jerusalem was already in ruins with no apparent remedy. A devastated city is ugly and depressing, but God is altogether lovely, worthy, and wonderful. In his grief, Nehemiah had to look to God as the source of his hope.

## **NEHEMIAH IN CONFESSION**

Nehemiah stepped into the grief, pain, and hurt of Jerusalem's shame, and made a heartfelt confession to his God. He repented for his sin as well as the sin of his family and the sin of his city. He intentionally looked beyond himself into his block.

This is diametrically opposed to individualistic thinking, which focuses on self and independence without accountability to anyone else. Paul says in the New Testament that we are the church, and the church is like a body: if one part suffers, everyone suffers with it (1 Cor. 12:26). Remember what God has promised: if we return to Him, repent and walk in the Word by the power of His Spirit, He will live among us as our God and King.

Nehemiah didn't sit back and say, "You know, some bad people have really jacked up my church and my city. I'll tweet about them and post what they did on Facebook." Instead he owned the city's problems, essentially saying: "I've helped create this problem myself." He identified his own guilt and confessed his own sin.

### **NEHEMIAH LOOKS TO GOD FOR HOPE**

Nehemiah had the realistic humility to see that he could never rebuild his city alone. He asked for the king's permission and blessing to gather a team that would rebuild Jerusalem, then gave up his position in the palace.

Knowing this endeavor would mean the end of all his other dreams, Nehemiah prepared to go back to the place he now desperately wanted to rebuild. He talked to Artaxerxes, the Persian king, a man who was opposed to the nation of Israel and held him captive. Nehemiah sought and found help in unlikely places! Artaxerxes personally permitted his trip and gave him the supplies and authority needed to reach and restore Jerusalem.

In doing this, Nehemiah is a shadow of Jesus' ministry of restoration. Both gave up a high position in order to identify with the plight of their people, both developed and fulfilled a specific mission, and both of their lives were characterized by prayerful dependence upon God.

Nehemiah gave up his cushy job as the cupbearer in the palace and risked his life going home to his hood, an unwalled city. He traded his health benefits and soft bed for a cot in a house that probably lacked a roof. He put his career, comfort, and life on the line to do what God was calling him to do. It's going to cost you something to follow Jesus in building up what has been broken down. The calling of God is not pretty and neat; it doesn't fit per-



factly into our ideal denominational box. It is messy and dangerous: lives are at stake, there are housing and racial implications, and it can often cost the inner-city missionary everything.

Nehemiah realized that he was not the only person still seeking after God and thanked the Lord that he wasn't the only one moved by the Holy Ghost. I am under no illusion that the church I serve is the only place God is working in my city. Furthermore, I know that I am neither the only one who cares nor the only pastor whom God is using. However, I am honored to be a part of what God is doing here.

## **NEHEMIAH BUILDS**

Nehemiah assembled the families of Israel and began rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem piece by piece. Opposition assailed the workers with fearsome rumors, scornful mockery, and death threats. But these didn't faze Nehemiah; he told the workers to have swords in one hand and hammers in the other. He stood strong in the face of opposition because he trusted in God and had a legacy in mind. We don't build up the broken cities for ourselves but for our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. That is why we feed our family, teach children, support the police, and pray at school ball games. Nehemiah looked beyond his own comfort and security to the brokenness and danger of Jerusalem for the sake of his people. It's not about us; it's for the present and the future.

We want this city to be one of joy, just as Nehemiah did. He wanted to help realize the promise of Jeremiah 33:9, where God says: "This city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the

good and all the prosperity I provide for it.” This is the ultimate outcome of rebuilding work: God glorified, His name magnified, and the nations seeing and praising Him.

The collective work of Nehemiah concluded with a renewal of worship in the temple. There was a dedication of the reconstructed city walls, where the people sang praises and the priests taught the people the word of God (Neh. 12:27–30). Together they celebrated the wonderful works of God.

Prior to the project, the Israelites were a downtrodden people in a devastated city. God put together this fragmented community; though they weren’t all builders, they sought to bless the city as a team and so accomplished things they never would have dreamed of doing. Our Lord has a long history of turning broken people into useful and beautiful vessels of His mercy. Paul, in a beautiful description, calls each believer Christ’s workmanship or masterpiece (Eph. 2:10).

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Nehemiah’s motivating passion in his labor to rebuild Jerusalem was to make God famous among the nations of the earth. His example gives us hope today, as urban residents, that God has a heart for the city—even our city. Christianity has historically been an urban religion, reflecting the progression of the Bible’s story: it begins in the garden of Eden but ends in a city, New Jerusalem.

One of my friends is a sculptor. When we would walk through the city of Philadelphia he’d almost always find shards of glass and rock or pieces of brick. He’d reach down, pick them off the ground and put them in his pocket. They seemed worthless to me—I thought he was crazy! Yet he would take those useless fragments from all over the city and form them into beautiful mosaics.

Nehemiah's rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem wasn't the real work; the people building up the city were God's masterpiece. The cement of that wall is gospel work. The gospel unifies us and makes us Christ's masterpiece. God takes people from all over the world—the broken, homeless, and fatherless—and glues us together into one family. Our family portrait then shows the world His majestic rebuilding project as we reach the least, the last, and the lost in the city.



## CHAPTER 3

# JESUS

If the gospel accounts teach us anything, it is that Jesus has an intense passion and love for people. His love and passion is most clearly displayed in His incarnation. Jesus left heaven, where He was continually worshiped by angels singing, “Holy, holy, holy,” and tucked His *shekinah* glory away to put on a human suit so that He could physically dwell with us (John 1:14) and engage us with His loving grace. He ultimately gave up His life on Calvary’s cross. Jesus gave up everything so He would be our everything!

The descent from perfect union within the Godhead to *take on human flesh*, from perfect light to utter darkness, from free and total dominion into a world of slavery, demonstrates His plain passion for people in His nature. He is literally the God-man, the Immanuel (“God *with* us”).

Indeed the mere fact that the eternal Word came down to earth, became man, and “became flesh and dwelt among us” is the greatest act of intimate engagement one could possibly imagine. He came down to experience the same temptations to sin that we experience. He sought to fully empathize with our tribulations.

His passion for people is manifest not only in His nature, but

in His ultimate purpose to serve as the propitiation for the sins of His people—a people hell-bent on disobeying Him. While all of humanity has turned against God and is plagued by mortal, self-inflicting wounds in our rebellion, Christ came, undeterred, to heal our suffering. This is a widespread healing that occurred through a one-time act of death and resurrection. This is a healing that is deeply personal, intimate. As He knows each hair on our head, He knows the stains that need to be washed away. Jesus entered into our mess and got His hands dirty. He pulled us out and cleaned us up with His grace in order that we might light up the world with His Word.

What's more, our Lord has not simply sought to be an empathetic Savior, but a personal *friend*. And while on earth, our Lord was fully emotionally engaged in the sufferings of others. He wept for the death of His friend Lazarus, despite knowing that He would soon resurrect him. He so intimately felt the pain of missing the earthly presence of this man that He *wept* with them.

Christ's ministry demonstrated closeness, even when He was surrounded by large groups of people. It is easy to misinterpret the instances when Christ fed the masses that followed Him, such as in Matthew 15. These scenes are not biblical versions of modern day soup kitchens—in which the hungry are fed but are not necessarily *cared for*. Christ provided for more than just the physical needs of His flock automatically at a scheduled time and place. This physical provision is an outward expression of a spiritual, eternal provision that is perfectly and personally calibrated to His flock's most ultimate need: namely, that of *Himself*.

The famous account of the woman at the well emphasizes the closeness of Jesus' ministry in another way by breaking through boundaries created by society. Here was a woman who had been

an outcast, who had been branded by society as an immoral woman and thus not worthy of close relationships within the community. To be simply near to her was considered defiling. But Christ did not see her this way. He did not find her unworthy of His personal attention or unworthy of His touch. Instead, Christ had an altogether different vision of her. He saw her as she truly ought to be considered—as one who could receive grace and thus be adorned in righteousness. He saw her dining with Him in glory. Indeed He saw her in this light from the beginning of time.

What a vivid depiction of the contrast in vision between culture and Christ! Instead of allowing cultural categories to constrain His engagement, He saw her as a *suffering individual* who needed to be saved and elevated to the *highest* position known to man—an heir with Christ. Like the feeding of the masses, Christ's engagement was again personal, efficacious, and fully orbled.

This is the example that we must emulate. The church's missional engagement must be infused with true *compassion*. This is a compassion that, as we have seen, cares for the intimate and personal needs of people. It is a compassion that seeks to provide for *comprehensive* wholeness instead of a narrow conception of what we think a person needs. It is a compassion that rejects and eschews cultural constructions, hierarchies, and assumptions, when they keep us distant and cloud our capacity to use our holy imagination.

Jesus exemplified this quality of cultural sensitivity throughout the gospel accounts. He engages the woman with the issue of blood in Luke 8:43–48 ever so carefully, yet He made His salvation and her faith in Him the centerpiece of the conversation. Jesus was also very sympathetic without reducing His engagement into mere social justice with the demon-possessed man in

Mark 5:1–20. We watch Jesus subdue the evil agents of Satan. The man was in spiritual bondage and so physically strong that no one could hold him. Yet the power of El Elyon (the Strongest One) would step in and subdue the man, send the demons away, and set the man free. Immediately after that the man was ready to give his life to follow Jesus on mission, yet Jesus would command him to stay, as He states in Mark 5:19–20, “‘Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.’ And he went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him, and everyone *marveled*” (emphasis added). Again, cultural sensitivity and the power of the gospel were at work.

I could bring up many more examples, but I would like to take your attention back to the woman at the well. Jesus is ever so gentle and yet potent with the truth of God’s words. She is a Samaritan woman who has had multiple husbands, multiple divorces, and in light of the ancient Near-East culture she was every bit of a dreg to society and worthless in many ways based on her past. In that culture she would be listed amongst the least, last, and lost, particularly to a man and even more, to a man who was a Jewish rabbi.

The woman needed Jesus’ saving power in the midst of her shame. I know a young man named Caleb who lived near my church building who tried everything to fix his life of heroin addiction. He struggled through multiple rehabilitation programs and centers, yet while he still struggled he still showed up to church. One day a pastor at my church shared the gospel with Caleb while he was high on drugs and very angry with the idea of God. Caleb received the Lord as Savior that day.

Caleb needed the power of the gospel in the midst of his

addiction. The dwellers on the block need the gospel. Jesus is the only “addiction” that satisfies. Jesus met the woman at the well in an unlikely place. Caleb met Jesus on the block, which for some is an unlikely place at an unlikely time. Caleb died young, only a few weeks after having received the Lord as Savior. We must have an uncompromised gospel engagement that is laced with cultural sensitivity and points to the Savior as the ultimate and immediate joy. Jesus is into meeting people at all kinds of places and times. Jesus meets people in their broken, godless, dead-in-sin conditions. He meets people on the block in their pain, their mess, their untimely situation, their thirst, their desperation, and in their baby daddy/momma drama.

Jesus was in a mess on the cross. A beautiful mess. On the cross, Jesus had pain, agony, and thirst. Yet in His perfect sensitivity, He took all the rejection and hatred but was sensitive to the lost He was drawing to Himself. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

## **CHRIST COMMANDS ALL TO MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

Throughout the Gospels (as well as the beginning of Acts), Jesus provides both commands and descriptions of the roles of all His followers after His death and resurrection. They are both future job descriptions and job imperatives: what they will do is what they are commanded to do. Christ’s command was not constrained to the select apostles for their particular task of founding the church. Rather, it is a universal command to all believers.

Jesus’ *commissions* have received extensive treatment, but it is worth quickly revisiting three key passages. In John 20:21, Christ



hints at the nature of the disciples' calling when He states, "As the Father sent me, even so I am sending you." In Acts 1:8 Christ gives His last exhortations to His apostles: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." And most famously in Matthew 28:19–20, Christ gives what has since been called His Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Although much more can be said about these passages, I will briefly highlight only three common characteristics of these verses: (1) they are global in aim and outward in direction, (2) they come as forward-looking commands, and (3) they are addressed to the church at large as those who are in covenant with Him.

These verses have a clear global and outward push to them. As new Christians, the disciples would have seen the world through a temple-centric lens. By God's command, God's people maintained separation from the nations for the sake of their own purity (Lev. 20:22–26). Israel was to be a blessing to the nations as the outsiders were called to the temple and were adopted into the covenant.

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost brings radical transformation. Christ pushes His followers out from Jerusalem to take the gospel to purify the sinful nations (Acts 1:8). Purity is no longer maintained by excluding the unclean from the temple, but the living temple, Jesus Christ, comes to the unclean to purify them. This is seen most vividly when Jesus heals the leper and the women with the flow of blood. Jesus constantly did things that made Him unclean and seemingly disqualified to be God's Messiah. But Jesus Himself is the One who purifies. He

makes His people clean by His touch of grace.

The command to go out would have challenged the disciples to go far and beyond the narrow strip of land in the Near East to reach the globe with the powerful, transforming good news of the Messiah. The Old Testament pictures the inclusion of the nations joining in the blessings of the people of God by joining with Israel on pilgrimage to the temple. In an unexpected twist, the temple goes on pilgrimage to the nations. The bricks that make up the New Testament temple are the people who have received Christ and have been transformed by the gospel.

The verbs Christ uses in each verse—"I am sending," "You will be . . . witnesses," and "go"—are all in the future imperative tense. They are not mere suggestions or helpful hints. They are commands from our Lord. Those who are sent by God are commanded to go. *Sentness* is not simply a special spiritual gift or unique characteristic of certain Christians, it is a condition of proper obedience for all Christians. We must take this calling seriously, but more on that later.

Although Christ was speaking directly to the disciples, His command is for the entire corporate body of the church—each and every one of its members. Not simply the pastors or missions teams, but all of us have been commanded and commissioned. All of us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, have been called and sent.

We see this explicitly in John 20:21, as Jesus sets Himself up as the model for missions. As He was sent by the Father, so are all believers sent. This is an essential part of what it means to be Christlike. Moreover, the word *witness* in Greek is the same as the word for *martyr*. Christ's command may have in view the entirety of Christian living, in which we die to ourselves and become alive in Christ. Missional living is a means by which we exhibit our

lives as image bearers of Christ.

Thus, the sending of Jesus by the Father has far-reaching implications for our understanding of Christian sentness. All believers are recipients of the Spirit of God and have the same spirit of sentness that Christ had; therefore, all have responsibility and obligation to missional service. As missional living was an essential aspect of Christ's ministry, so should it be exhibited in the believer who strains to become more and more like the one by whose mission he was saved. It is, in other words, truly *every man and woman* who is called.