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CHAPTER 1

UPROOTED

Where are you from?

Most of us can answer the question with relative ease by naming the place we were born or perhaps the city where we spent our coming-of-age years.

It isn't quite so easy to answer a related question: Where are you going? We might be able to take a swat at it in the short-term ("to the kitchen to grab a snack"), but even those of us with excellent long-range forecasting skills know circumstances change. Plans need to be revised or scrubbed entirely.

I grew up in the northwest suburbs of Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s. There is a specificity to the time and place from which I launched. My family enjoyed deep-dish pizza. My sister and I watched the *Bozo the Clown* show on Channel 9 after walking home from school for lunch most every day. We shopped for

back-to-school clothes at E. J. Korvette's in Niles. Those tidbits about my origins might explain some things about me, but they can't answer fully the question of where I'm from, nor are they the final word about where I'm going.

I was about sixteen and a new believer the first time I heard the phrase "God has a wonderful plan for your life." It was language I saw in evangelistic tracts and heard from a few well-meaning youth pastors. I imagined God had a specific set of instructions for me, and if I couldn't figure them out, it was an obvious failure of faith on my part. I pelted God with prayers that were thinly disguised demands: "Tell me where I am going, Lord. Really. I *need* to know." Those prayers were really anxious requests for God to download the cheat codes for my life into my soul so I could win (in His name, of course!) the game of adulthood. You probably won't be surprised to hear that He did not send me a wonderful plan for my life that included detailed career information, the name of my future spouse, the number of children I'd have, or the date I'd die.

This might tell you more about where I'm coming from than the tidbits about where my family shopped or the local television show I watched while I ate my lunchtime PB&J. My craving for an ironclad guarantee of success and safety is an expression of my culture's values as well as a peek inside the heart of a struggling teen teetering on the brink of independence.

"Where are you from? Where are you going?" Our individual life experiences are not sufficient to answer those Big Questions. And in a world that seems to warp in surreal ways at the speed of each day's headline, our time, place, and culture can't

rightly interpret our past or guide us into our future. Attempting to ignore those questions leaves us as adrift as an empty plastic bottle floating on an unsettled sea.

But there is a powerful, true story that can rightly orient each one of us to where we've been and guide us onward. It isn't a new story, but revisiting it with those questions in mind can begin to help us understand the why behind our wandering.

WANDERING'S STARTING LINE

The origins for our status as wanderers are found in the first few pages of the Bible. Flip those tissue-thin pages open to Genesis 1, and you'll land in a perfect garden created to be a forever home for humankind. The man and woman who lived in this place led a peaceful existence free of the shadows of shame. The work they did to tend the place was so simple and joyful that it must have felt akin to what we call "play." Every meal in the garden was a feast shared in perfect communion and companionship with the One who spoke water droplets, bobcats, and pomegranates into being and said every atom of it was good.

Into the human ones He'd crafted to reflect His image, God wired the ultimate imprint of His love by giving them the holy freedom to choose whether they'd return His love. A single tree in the garden filled with groves of beautiful, fruit-filled trees was the test of this freedom and measure of their love. Would they do what their Creator was asking of them? This single Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil carried with it one rule and a shattering consequence if Adam and Eve chose to violate that rule:

don't eat from this tree, because when you do, you will die (Gen. 2:16–17).

The Bible doesn't tell us how long the innocent pair stayed away from the tree. Days? Centuries? Yet humans know choice carries with it its own kind of hunger. The serpent smelled their hunger as if Adam and Eve were its prey. One twisted question from the scaly creature to Eve (“Did God really say . . . ?”) drew woman and then man to sample fruit from the tree. Their choice to answer the serpent's question instead of responding in trust to God's declaration left them stripped bare of their innocence. They'd known good. Now they knew evil.

God followed through with the consequences He'd promised. He didn't destroy the world or abandon them. Instead, now armed with the knowledge of good and evil, humankind would discover the return route to communion with Him as they journeyed from Eden. One of the saddest images in Scripture is their final moment in the garden: “So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:23–24).

An instrument of death was used to guard the Tree of Life, the fiery sword brandished by angels is an image of holiness and judgment. As the exiled man and woman began walking away from Eden, they entered a world of struggle and second chances. There was no going back.

They were from Eden. But where were they going?

Genesis 4 records the first movements of the couple's new life

outside the garden. Adam made love to his wife, and she bore him two sons. Delight mingled with exhaustion as Eve labored to bring children into the world, and Adam found the play he'd known in the garden become back-breaking hard work. Then they experienced the curse of death that cut straight to their hearts as their older son, Cain, murdered his younger brother, Abel. They lost Cain as God told him the consequences for his sin would be to spend the rest of his days living as a restless wanderer on the earth (Gen. 4:12).

Every subsequent generation was free to choose to respond in obedience to God, or not. Someone once told me that God has children, but no grandchildren. In other words, every generation must form their own fresh relationship with their heavenly Father. The faith their parents hold must become fully their own. The early generations of those exiled from Eden gradually disconnected from God, wandering so far that God spoke of putting an end to the world He made (Gen. 6:5–8).

Noah was born into this milieu. He was history's first countercultural rebel. His "rebellion" came in the form of walking faithfully with God when every single person around him was doing the opposite. This placed him solidly in the weirdo category to everyone in his world. His reputation probably suffered even more when he began building a boat the size of an ancient shopping mall after reporting to his neighbors that this is what God told him to do.

I wonder if he ever heard the whispered hiss of "Did God *really* say . . . ?" If he did, he silenced the whisper with his obedience, transforming his family's exile from Eden into a pilgrimage

into the unknown.¹ Because of his faithfulness, you and I are here today (Heb. 11:7).

When Noah and his family disembarked from the ark after the flood waters receded, the ground was probably still sodden beneath their feet. God's delight-filled marching orders to the group echoed the command He gave to Adam at creation: be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:7). The group (and eventually, their descendants) embraced this command with gusto. Within a few generations, Noah's descendants realized all the multiplying they'd been doing would necessitate some division. There were simply too many people living in the same zip code.

Anxiety began breeding among the huddled masses living on the plain of Shinar. They didn't want to split up. The curse from Eden was more than hard work and painful childbirth. It was alienation. Isolation. Disconnection. The fear of the unknown—of being forgotten by one another and by God—birthed a plan among them that must have seemed like a certain solution to their problems: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:4).

Blessing was embedded in God's command to Noah to multiply and increase. The fear gripping those descendants led them to misinterpret the blessing as a curse. They spoke the same language, so fear traveled at the speed of rumor through the people. Noah's descendants believed they'd suffer if they didn't take things into their own hands.

So they did just that. They'd lived as farmers and flock-herders to this point, but came together with the building program

to end all building programs. They began work on a city—they were determined to stay together!—crowning it with a tower that would give them easy access to the God who seemed to live just beyond their grasp. The builders at Shinar may have used bricks to construct their city and tower, but they mortared them with a desire to control their destiny and their God.

As the Triune One surveyed the construction project at Shinar, He said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other” (Gen. 11:6–7).

In an instant, sonic dissonance whirled and divided the people. They splintered into dozens of ad hoc tribes, formed out of those who understood one another’s frantic cries for help amid the cacophony of brand-new mother tongues.

It wasn’t just the words that became confused in this chaos, but the meanings of the words. Does “dog” denote a Chihuahua or a Great Dane? When I say something is “interesting,” does it mean it is truly fascinating or is it a catchall word to use when I don’t know what else to say but want to keep the conversation moving?

Misunderstanding leads to confusion. And confusion leads to scattering. Both the tower built to access heaven and the event that sent the people into exile from one another are known as Babel, a name rooted in a word that means “to jumble.”



In the sonic violence of the scattering at Shinar, it is a temptation to misinterpret not only words, but the very character of

BORN TO WANDER

God. Extract His love from the story, and Babel reads like the account of a capricious deity at play, watching humankind writhe and run like lab rats in a giant cosmic experiment.

But that is not who God is. The launch from Babel was meant to preserve His people, not destroy them. He gave polyglot tongues to them as a preservative as well as consequence. In perfect love, God intentionally disoriented them, sending them into exile from one another in order to reorient them to Himself. He'd made each one of them and knew they'd be able to hear His voice without translation through the noise as they began walking away from Shinar.

A MOVING TARGET

The accounts populating the first pages in our Bibles are at the heart of our human experience. Each of us knows the sorrow that comes from being disconnected from God and others.

A few years ago, my husband and I served as foster parents for a series of newborns. We considered opening our home to include older children in the foster system. I remember reading through a book published by our state featuring the descriptions of foster children waiting for adoption. These descriptions included lots of positive language about each child ("Michael is an affectionate eight-year-old who loves sports and video games") along with notes about any physical or mental health diagnoses the child had received.

I was struck by the fact that many of the children were being medicated for treatment of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity

Disorder (ADHD). The diagnosis is used to describe a child who consistently has difficulty attending to and completing developmental-stage appropriate tasks like chores or school work. They can be impulsive and are often a bundle of nonstop, unfocused activity. I told a social worker friend I was a little startled by the high percentage of kids in the foster care system with this diagnosis.

She responded, "It's hard for grief to hit a moving target." She went on to explain that by the time a child ends up in foster care, they've almost always experienced an incredible amount of disruption, trauma, and loss. The ADHD diagnosis is, for a fair percentage of these children, both a result of their past losses and a coping mechanism for an uncertain present.

In varying degrees, we humans live as moving targets, trying to escape the existential grief of separation from God and others. This reality is at the heart of our wandering. Even those of us with relatively healthy family stories still experience the painful disconnect that comes from exile from Eden and the miscommunication that replays the Babel story in our lives on a regular basis.

One of the big questions of life is "Who am I?" Some suggest we find the answer to that question via the physical: our appearance, our gender. Some contend that identity resides in our ethnicity, network of relationships, or culture. Others say our identity is formed by what we do. This includes our work, our earning potential, even our hobbies and passions. Ethics defines identity for yet another group. We are defined by which moral choices we embrace and which we eschew.

Our sense of self takes a beating when we experience failure or face the severing of a meaningful relationship. We are

disoriented when we lose our jobs or our kids leave the nest. Our souls are fragmented by the physical, cultural, economic, and ethical mirrors we use to define ourselves because those mirrors are not accurate. While those externals can provide helpful clues to the question of who we are, they are not reliable reflectors of truth.

We are more than just the sum of our own life experiences. We also carry within us the exile history of our forebears.

I am a Jewish follower of Jesus. My people, the Jews, have been wanderers for a very long time. We've lived far from home throughout most of our history, dispersed among the nations of the world yet preserved as a people.² We've faced the Inquisition, waves of persecution, expulsion en masse from various countries, the pogroms in Russia, and the Holocaust. In a 1996 speech, then-President of Israel, Ezer Weizman, said, "I am a wandering Jew who follows in the footsteps of my forebearers. And just as I escort them there and now and then, so do my forebearers accompany me and stand with me here today."³ To live as a member of a diaspora community means you are a part of a people group scattered from their ancient homeland. My people have been imprinted—perhaps all the way down to the cellular level—by generations of terror and trauma, by our diaspora experience.

I wasn't surprised to learn that scientists have discovered that the effect of one generation's trauma may well be transmitted genetically to subsequent generations. This relatively new (and somewhat controversial) field of study is called epigenetics, which means, literally, "above the gene." Epigenetics researchers note that trauma changes the chemical structure surrounding our DNA. One generation's experience of suffering can be

transmitted genetically to successive generations, heightening and intensifying physiological responses those descendants have to trauma and stress. The focus of current studies in this area include the descendants of Holocaust survivors and members of the Native American community, which also has a long history of generational trauma.⁴

Not long ago, I heard a hint of the way this generational experience of wandering can impact us. After my young adult son moved from the Midwest to Colorado, I asked him if he was homesick. Jacob told me he didn't feel he had the ability to miss a specific place. "I miss my family, but what I know how to do best is to keep moving." He had only two homes during his growing-up years, but he has generations of diaspora experience wired into his DNA. It's hard for grief to hit a moving target. He knows how to wander.

We all do. There is something familiar to every human being about the distress of damaged relationships, the disorientation of relocation, and the soul-altering grief of loss. The things in this world that mark us as wanderers point to our exile from Eden and scattering from Babel. They leave us with a sense of homesickness that not even the coziest home or the most joyous family reunion can ever dispel.

Author Stephen King said, "Homesickness is not always a vague, nostalgic, almost beautiful emotion, although that is somehow the way we always seem to picture it in our mind. It can be a terribly keen blade, not just a sickness in metaphor but in fact as well. It can change the way one looks at the world; the faces one sees in the street look not just indifferent but ugly . . .

perhaps even malignant. Homesickness is a real sickness—the ache of the uprooted plant.”⁵

The ache of the uprooted plant is why we wander. We are born seekers. Curiosity and longing are at the core of who we are as human beings. We see curiosity in the 27,493 questions a day a three-year-old seems to ask. We can tap into longing as we cherish a nostalgic view of the past, hoping against hope that the good ol’ days will salve the ache of our uprooted-ness.

But the ache of the uprooted plant is designed to graft us to the One who made us. Uprooted-ness is an uncomfortable identity and not one most of us would choose for ourselves.

Early church fathers said the state of humankind was that of the *homo viator* (traveler, pilgrim). We have been born to wander. The questions of where we’re from or where we’re going are clarified by this truth. They become: “Are we moving toward God or wandering away from him?”⁶

It is an unsettling question. Those who crave nostalgia or long to live in bunkers of contentment may not be interested in answering it. But for wanderers, the question is a reminder that exile has a purpose that goes far beyond telling us what our next zip code is to be.

To consider

1. In what ways would you say that wandering has marked your life so far? Your answer can include geographical wandering, but may also include relational scattering, vocational upheaval, or other kinds of disruption that led you away from where you thought you were going. How have these changes affected your life? Your faith?

2. As you reflect on the accounts shared here about the events detailed in the first few chapters of Scripture, what questions do you have regarding our status as wanderers? How do they connect with your own experience? Consider writing those questions in the form of a prayer or letter to God.

3. How have you seen the statement “It’s hard for grief to hit a moving target” play out in your life?

To pray

You who spoke the world into being by Your word, I honor You. You alone are God. There is no other.

In perfect, holy love, You made this world. In perfect, holy love, You embedded in humankind the ability to choose. In perfect, holy love, You have both preserved and corrected us even when we've chosen not to return Your love with our obedience. I grieve over all that has been damaged and savaged in this world. And I recognize the generational brokenness I carry and the weight of my own sin, both of which reside within me.

As I name my sin, Lord, I recognize something else just a little more clearly too. I recognize that I am a wanderer, longing to hide. I am an exile, living far from who You created me to be.

King David, who knew well his own brokenness, penned these words:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me

and the light become night around me,"

Uprooted

even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Ps. 139:7–12)

I cannot hide from You, though my sin makes me want to flee from You. Though I wander, there is nowhere I can go where You are not present. I am an exile, but that is not who You created me to be. As I pray these words in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I recognize that the questions of where I'm from and where I'm going are wrapped within my deep longing to journey with You.

Amen.