

Restoring the image of God — Cataclysm at the cross

The last several weeks we've been following God's actions in restoring the image of God in humanity. Last week we discussed some disputes Jesus had with the Pharisees, and how those disputes largely revolved around how to read scripture. This week, we're going to explore the major impasse Jesus had with the religious leaders of His day. This impasse revolves around two issues:

1. Who are the people of God?, and
2. What is the purpose of the Temple?

In looking at these questions, I'd like to make a few observations based on our studies from the last several weeks.

God doing for humanity what humanity cannot do for itself

Throughout history, God has established a pattern of doing for humanity what humanity cannot do for itself.

We discover this principle as we discover the overall pattern of the interaction of God with His people. Let's run through a few examples.

God told Adam to have dominion over the world; instead he ceded his dominion to evil. God then told Cain to master the principle of sin within him; instead Cain failed to master the evil within him. Now God had promised that One would fight the serpent on humanity's behalf (Genesis 3:15). So God graciously stepped in and did for man what man could not do for himself.

God had told humanity to multiply and fill the earth; when it came time for God's chosen instrument, Abraham, to do so, he found he couldn't. So God graciously stepped in and did for man what man could not do for himself.

God instructed Israel at Sinai to keep His words. The people agreed to do so, and then promptly failed. Moses later instructed Israel that they needed to have a wholehearted, inner change in their being: to keep God's words from the very centre of their hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16). But Israel found they could not do so. So God graciously stepped in and promised to do for Israel what Israel could not do for herself (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 31:31–34).

So, we have this pattern. God doing for humanity what humanity cannot do for itself. God doing for you and I what you and I cannot do for ourselves.

Corporate humanity

When scripture refers to Adam, it has a twin meaning. It means Adam as an individual, and Adam as the head of humanity. Adam's very name suggests exactly this interpretation, for "Adam" means "man".

So too, when scripture refers to Abraham, it refers not only to Abraham but to all of Abraham's descendants (Hebrews 7:9). When scripture refers to Jacob in Rebecca's womb, it specifically says that Jacob stands for a nation (Genesis 25:23).

So, this idea that the father, the head of a people, incorporates the people, we will call "corporate humanity." We can call it corporate humanity because the ancestor incorporates all of his descendants.

The importance of this concept is that the actions of the corporate head accrue to all descendants. Adam sinned; so all his descendants are born sinful. Abraham paid tithe to Melchizedek; so all Levites are said to have paid tithe to Melchizedek. What the corporate head does implicates the corporate body. It's as if the corporate body has individually done what the corporate head did on their behalf. So, that's the pattern of corporate humanity.

Representative humanity

There is another pattern that's important to us, and that is of representative humanity. Scripture is full of individuals who place themselves in a position to represent their fellow kinsmen.

When Israel ratified the covenant with God at Sinai, seventy elders saw God and ate with Him (Exodus 24:11). Those seventy elders represented all of Israel.

David represented Israel in his fight with Goliath (1 Samuel 17).

Israel's king represented Israel.

Abraham, in addition to being viewed as the corporate head of Israel, is viewed as being a representative of humanity. For through Abraham, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Israel, therefore, is a representative of humanity before God. And as representative of humanity, her purpose is not self-referential (Deuteronomy 7:6–8), but Israel's purpose is what she will do for humanity (Deuteronomy 4:6–8). For the purpose of the covenant God formed with Israel was that Israel would represent humanity before God, and represent God to humanity. That's what it means to be a nation of priests (Exodus 19:5–6). God did not select Israel because of her goodness or greatness, but for God's purpose for her.

So, we'll call this pattern representative. Representative humanity is where an individual or a nation represents their fellow kinsmen. It's as if the representative stands in for their kinsmen, so that what the representative does or has done to stands in for their kinsfolk.

What's wrong?

But in Jesus' day, something was wrong. It was easy to see things were wrong. It was a little more difficult understanding what was to be done about the wrongness.

The most obvious thing wrong was the domination of the Land by the Romans. Continued oppression of the people by these Gentiles pointed to Moses' unfinished prophecy. For thousands of years, the story of the descendants of Abraham had seemed to be predicted by prophecy. But now that seemed to have paused ...

The temple, of course, was the visible sign of the covenant with YHWH. The temple sacrifices pointed to the on-going relationship between YHWH and His people. It had become a source of national pride. The temple was the symbol of the promise of the covenant-keeping God that He would make His people great and prosperous and politically powerful again.

But even the temple, glorious though it may be, was a little suspect. For one, the dimensions to which it was built matched neither Solomon's temple nor the dimensions of the temple seen in vision by Ezekiel (Ezra 3:12; Ezekiel 40–48). For another, this temple was clearly Herod's temple—and it was obvious that Herod was not the true ruler of Israel—after all, Herod was an Edomite. Also, this temple had never been anointed with the Shekinah glory of YHWH the way Solomon's temple had been. Clearly, all these things added up. Clearly, someone, someday, would rebuild the temple (Zechariah 6:12–13).

Of course, the priests and rulers of the temple were wrong too. Everyone knew that. The Romans had played a canny political game, and had selected the priests and rulers of the temple to maximise the Romans' political advantage. You see, the Romans had realised that if they allowed people with bloodlines and heredity deserving of the post, then those priests and rulers had a claim that didn't depend on them. So, they had specifically chosen people who did not deserve to be priests and rulers, so that their claim to the post hinged on Rome being in charge. That way, these political appointees would tow the line.

More than one group of people present in Jesus' day had made these observations. For example, the sect down in the deserts of Qumran, down by the Jordan river, had diagnosed these problems years before.

The Qumran sect had declared the remnant of Judah, Benjamin and Levi who had returned from Babylon to be hopelessly corrupt. Corrupted by politics. Corrupted by leadership. Corrupted by smooth sounding Pharisaic "traditions of the elders" (halakhic traditions). Qumran claimed that these people were corrupted to the point where God had rejected them.

While the Pharisees claimed to be the true descendants of Israel; the Qumran priesthood claimed that the remnant returned from Babylon were not Israel. Qumran claimed that God was initiating His promises to Israel through the Qumran community itself. Qumran argued that it was the Qumran community who were the true Israel, the renewed Israel. Qumran argued that Israel's promises would be fulfilled through their community.

Pretty bold claims indeed. Claims that the Sadducees and Pharisees, the priests and rulers of the temple, the teachers of scripture in Israel, clearly rejected.

Who is elected a son of Abraham?

The Pharisee's claim to be Israel stemmed from their understanding of God's election within Abraham's corporate body.

You see, not all of Abraham's physical descendants were part of Israel. God promised Abraham that his family would be a blessing to the world. Abraham birthed both Ishmael and Isaac; yet it was Isaac who was elected by God to be Abraham's heir. Isaac in turn birthed Jacob and Esau; and God chose Jacob to be Isaac's heir. The Pharisee's claim was that election ended with Jacob (Israel). For them, Jacob was the end of the line. That descendants of Jacob were the true heirs, members of the corporate body, of Abraham.

But when John the Baptist began to preach, John rejected that perspective. For John said,

Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham" (Luke 3:8).

When John the Baptist said these words to the Pharisees, perhaps he caused them to think of a passage from Isaiah 51 which says,

"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek YHWH:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him" (Isaiah 51:1–2).

So John is calling for his listeners to remember that God had called Abraham—who was an Aramean, and childless—to be His child. In so doing, God had created children from stones! And if God had the power to create children from the stones of Abraham, then He could do it again.

Now remember where John was standing when he said those words. He was standing down by the Jordan river. The very place where Israel had crossed into the Promised Land. By calling for people to be immersed in the Jordan, John is calling people to pass through the waters again, to relive Israel's journey, to remove her sins and to provoke a new entry into the Land. That, after all, is what Israel was looking for—the end of Exile, signalling the forgiveness of her sins, and her wholehearted turning toward God (Deuteronomy 30:6).

John's message denies the idea that one is elected a son of Abraham by physical descent. John's message calls for the physical descendants of Abraham to repent in order to be a son of Abraham.

Sons of Abraham enslaved?

Remember the story about the woman who bled for 18 years (Luke 13:10–17)? Jesus said that Satan had bound, enslaved, her. She was a daughter of Abraham, but needed to be freed. So, John's message and Jesus' message is that Satan's power can enslave, and

repentance and healing and God's grace is required to restore a son or daughter of Abraham to fellowship.

So this is the background of Jesus' debate with the Pharisees in John 8. Jesus said the Pharisees were enslaved, by sin. They said, "We're not! We're Abraham's child!" Jesus replied, "If you were Abraham's child, you would do what Abraham did" (John 8:39).

Right at that moment, they were plotting to murder Jesus in the name of God. "This is not the action of a son of Abraham," says Jesus, "this is the action of a son of the devil."

Who is your father?

Both John and Jesus express the opinion that your parentage is reflected in what you do. This logic is a classic reflection of the idea of corporate humanity. You're acting in accordance with Abraham? Well, you're his son. You're not doing what Abraham did? You're obviously not his son!

Neither Jesus nor John invented this logic. You can see this logic at work in Ezekiel 16. For in Ezekiel 16, God says to Jerusalem:

"Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite" (Ezekiel 16:3).

This is in no way a physical statement. It is a spiritual statement. Jerusalem's actions declare their parentage.

Conflict with the religious establishment

Last week we reviewed a range of debates Jesus had with the Pharisees. He condemned their legal teachings as a perversion of God's will. But in claiming their parentage is of Satan, not of Abraham, He's striking at something absolutely core to their self-identity.

Possession of the temple, the national symbol of Israel's covenant with God, was also core to their self-identity. Yet Jesus became known for making remarks that sound remarkably anti-temple. For example, the Samaritan woman challenged Jesus about the temple. She said,

"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (John 4:20).

And Jesus replied,

"The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father" "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21, 23).

This statement would sound like heresy to an upstanding Sadducee or Pharisee. The temple was THE symbol of God's favour, and it was THE key place of worship. Yet Jesus seemed to dismiss it.

Jesus also went on record saying that the temple would be destroyed, that no stone would be left standing (Mark 13:2; Matthew 24:2), perhaps even that the very mount on which the temple stood would be thrown in the sea (Matthew 21:21).

And, do you want to know what may have even been worse, in the eyes of the religious establishment of Jesus' day? Jesus not only applied scripture to Himself, but He applied the religious significance of the temple to Himself (John 2:18–22). Jesus said He Himself was the temple!

So, when Jesus interrupted the temple services in that last fateful visit to Jerusalem, He triggered a fundamental reaction from the religious establishment. Jesus stood there in the temple and condemned the religious leaders for making the temple a symbol of national resistance. Jesus said,

“It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13).

This phrase, “den of robbers” refers to the caves in which bandits—religious freedom fighters—would hide out in between their guerrilla attacks against the Romans. Jesus is saying that you’ve made the temple the central focus of national resistance against the imperial overlords, and by doing so, you’ve corrupted the temple’s very purpose.

Jesus said the temple is supposed to be a place where people from all nations can come and worship. But this religious establishment erected a barrier around it, preventing Gentiles and women and slaves from approaching the temple. They’ve turned it from a house of peace to a house that incites religious violence.

Instead of sons of Abraham blessing all the families of the earth by directing them to the worship of the Father, these sons of the devil have turned the temple into a national monument of their impending supremacy over and against all the other families of the earth. And they were prepared to use the tool of religious violence in order to make it happen.

And Jesus stood there and wept, saying,

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

And then Jesus pronounces a judgment on the temple, and proceeds to foretell its destruction (Matthew 23:38; 24:2).

Impending judgment

But this note of judgment was not new. For the message about impending judgment began right at the beginning, with the teachings of John the Baptist. For John had said that ultimate judgment was imminent.

“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–9).

Jesus had followed this up with a similar message of impending judgment.

“I came to cast fire on the earth,
and would that it were already kindled!
I have a baptism to be baptized with,
and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!
Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:49–51).

Note that parallelism in this passage? The ‘casting of fire’ and the ‘baptism’ are parallels. They refer to the same event.

What message did this conjure up in listener’s minds? Perhaps it reminded them of this passage in Isaiah.

“The light of Israel will become a fire,
and his Holy One a flame,
and it will burn and devour
his thorns and briers in one day.
The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land
the Lord will destroy, both soul and body,
and it will be as when a sick man wastes away.
The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can write them down” (Isaiah 10:17–19).

This passage seems to suggest that YHWH’s judgment will reduce His forest to an incredibly small number. And,

“In an instant, suddenly,
you will be visited by the Lord of hosts
with thunder and with earthquake and great noise,
with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire” (Isaiah 29:5–6).

Which implies this would occur quickly, suddenly and without warning. Fire and baptism. Fire and judgment. Fire and God’s presence. They are sobering thoughts that both John and Jesus had preached from the beginning of their ministries.

Yet the message of judgment had always been linked with the message of redemption. Take this passage as an example.

“So he poured on him the heat of his anger
and the might of battle;
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.
But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour” (Isaiah 42:25–43:3a).

Casting fire on the earth

So it was that the religious leaders, stung by the fact that Jesus taught without reference to their authority; stung by the fact that Jesus related all scripture to Himself; stung by the fact that Jesus condemned their teachings; stung by the fact that Jesus appeared anti-temple; stung by the fact that Jesus condemned them as being not of Abraham’s progeny; and finally stung by the fact that Jesus interrupted the temple services and condemned their control of the temple ... decided to act.

They decided to kill him.

“It is better that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (John 11:50).

Announced the High Priest.

And by hanging Him on that tree, they baptised Him with the baptism that was awaiting Him. They caused the fire of judgment that He prophesied to be cast on the earth.

They initiated the prophesied pairing of judgment and redemption. Judgment, because the fire of God’s judgment rained down on the earth and, spiritually, burned everyone alive.

“It set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart” (Isaiah 42:25).

But what is the very next line? Redemption,

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1).

The fire of judgment and the promise of redemption are twinned.

The cataclysm of the cross meant judgment and death to everyone in Adam; and that judgment was meted out on the Person and Body of the Representative of Israel, the representative of humanity.

The temple, rebuilt

That representative died, but did not stay dead.

For the temple was rebuilt; His body resurrected.

And humanity gained a new corporate head—the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Surely, predictions about the Messiah rebuilding the temple were correct. For the true temple indeed was rebuilt. And that temple, the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, incorporates all who believe on Him, for surely they have passed from death to life (John 5:24).

And the Shekinah glory, oh so missing from Herod's temple, was poured out on the true temple (Acts 2:4; Ephesians 3:19).

And the new covenant, rooted and grounded in the promise of a newly circumcised heart, was ratified and initiated (Luke 22:20; Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 9:15).

Jesus, the representative of Israel, the representative of humanity, had died. On resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ, now the corporate head of Israel, the corporate head of humanity, had arisen.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the centre and focus of everything:

- He is the Word of God
- He is the focus of Scripture
- He is the fulfilment of Prophecy
- He is the light of the world
- He is the bread of life
- He is the breath of life
- He is the living water
- He is the true temple
- He is the Father of us all
- He is Israel
- He is Adam (Man)
- He is God

And He wants everyone, everywhere—and this means you—to realise that Adam died, has been reduced to ashes in the cataclysm of the judgment at the cross.

But if you hear God appealing in your heart to repent of all things Adam, to die to Adam's sin, to put aside Adam's thinking, to renounce the murderous violence at the centre of his transgression; if you're attracted to the call of peace, if you're willing for everything Adam in you to die, to be reborn, to have your mind transformed and be renewed, to have your desires reshaped, to take on a new identity, to be reborn into the family of God, to join God's kingdom of priests, to obey the LORD, the KING who now rules in the presence of His enemies (Psalm 110:2), then you're hearing the call of God, which is the will of God.

If you're hearing the call of God, you're hearing the hope of glory, which is Christ in you (Colossians 1:27). And if you're hearing the call of God, then surely today is the day of salvation for you.

Welcome to the family of God.