The Unholy Land and the Ministry of Death

Terry Kashian | A Door for the Word

Before we can speak honestly about what men have ruined, we have to speak reverently about what God Himself built. God called Abraham. He gave Israel His Law. He filled the tabernacle with His glory. A man who loved the Scriptures had every reason to cherish these things. Stephen cherished them. So did Paul. How, then, did both men come to be accused of speaking against them?

Listen to the witnesses at Stephen's hearing. They charge him with speaking against the holy place and the Law, and with saying that Jesus would change the customs handed down by Moses. Luke calls them false witnesses. Years later, in the temple at Jerusalem, men raise much the same cry against Paul. This time the accusation names three things dear to the hearers: the people, the Law, and the place. The crowd believes Paul has brought a Gentile into the temple. Luke tells us how readily a man seen walking with Paul in the city became, in the minds of his accusers, a man Paul had taken into the sanctuary (Acts 6:13–14 and 21:27–29).

I have sometimes felt the weight of that accusation when speaking about Israel and Jerusalem. What do I mean, then, by the troubling words "the unholy land"? God Himself called the ground beneath Moses' feet holy. Moses had been tending sheep there when God spoke to him (Exodus 3:1–5). The ground owed its holiness to the One who met him there. My concern is with the claim we make for a place when we suppose that standing on its soil brings us nearer to the Father. What could the soil of Jerusalem give a believer in Tucson that the risen Lord has withheld?

The same question reaches beyond geography. A Christian can put that confidence in the building where he first heard the gospel, or in the community whose customs he knows by heart. I want to follow the three strands of the accusation through Scripture and ask what becomes of each when we come to Christ.

The question is just as searching today as it was at Stephen's hearing. What are we claiming for the modern state of Israel, for Jerusalem, or for our own religious heritage when we speak of the favor of God? The promises were dear to Israel because of the One who gave them. Their fulfillment asks us to turn our eyes to His Son.

The people and the promise

Peter had to answer a practical question. Gentiles had heard the gospel and believed. Must these brothers now be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses? Peter asked the assembly in Jerusalem to remember what God had already done. The God who knew their hearts had given them the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Spirit to the Jewish believers. What further qualification could Peter demand of men whose hearts God had cleansed by faith? (Acts 15:1–11.)

Peter could say this as a son of Israel. So could Paul. His words about the children of the promise grew out of grief for his own kindred, to whom belonged the covenants and the promises and from whom the Messiah came according to the flesh (Romans 9:1–8). That tenderness ought to govern our speech about Jewish people today. Paul himself warns Gentile believers against boasting over the branches. They depend upon the root that bears them (Romans 11:17–20).

Peter saw God give the Spirit to Gentiles. Paul draws out the consequence in Romans 10:12. The same Lord is rich toward all who call upon Him. Writing to Colossae, Paul takes us into the life of the new man. Here, he says, “Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:10–11). Where is “here”? Among people whom Christ has brought into His new creation. What standing could my ancestry secure for me in that company that my brother has yet to receive?

Follow Paul’s reasoning about Abraham. In Galatians 3:16 he identifies the promised Seed as Christ. By the end of the chapter he can look at a room full of believers of different origins and tell them that everyone who belongs to Christ is Abraham’s offspring and an heir according to promise (Galatians 3:26–29). How can the Seed be one and the heirs so many? The answer lies in those few words, “if you are Christ’s.” Our share in the promise comes through our belonging to Him.

Paul first encountered the force of that belonging on the Damascus road. He had been hunting down disciples. Yet the voice from heaven asked why he was persecuting Jesus (Acts 22:6–8). Think of what that must have meant to a disciple Saul had dragged from home. The exalted Lord took that injury as His own. Years later, writing of the many members who form one body, Paul could say, “so also is Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). Then he tells the Corinthians what this means for them. They are Christ’s body, and each one is a member (12:27). This is what I mean by the corporate Christ. The living Lord has joined His people so closely to Himself that how I treat the least of them is a matter between me and Him.

Christ is the Greek title for the One Israel called Messiah. Read Paul’s words again with that title in mind: “so also is the Messiah.” Who would have expected Paul to speak of the Anointed One this way while describing a body with many members? The One to whom the promise was spoken has gathered us into His own life. That is how Abraham can have a single Seed and a household of heirs.

Is Christ divided?

In Corinth the believers could name the teacher to whom they felt closest. One belonged to Paul, another to Apollos, another to Cephas. Someone else could even say, “I am of Christ,” in the same breath that his brother claimed Paul. Listen to the question Paul puts to all of them: “Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:12–13). What Christ could I possibly be claiming if belonging to Him gave me grounds to exclude another member of His body?

This is where Paul’s words about knowing others according to the flesh begin to search me (2 Corinthians 5:16–17). Saul once knew enough about the disciples to identify them, arrest them, and take them away. What he had yet to see was the Lord who claimed them as His own. When I look at a brother and see only his people, his customs, or the name of his teacher, how much of Christ am I overlooking?

In Galatia the question of belonging took a sharper turn. Gentile believers were being pressed to accept circumcision. Paul takes them into Abraham’s household, where Ishmael and Isaac were both sons, yet Isaac’s birth depended upon God keeping His word. Paul sees in Hagar and Sarah two covenants. He associates Hagar with Sinai and the Jerusalem of his day. Of the Jerusalem above he says that she is free and is our mother (Galatians 4:21–28).

Paul also remembers the hostility faced by the child of promise. He sees it repeated in his own day when those who insist on circumcision bring pressure upon those who have received the Spirit (Galatians 4:29). Then comes the hard word from Sarah’s story: “Cast out the bondwoman and her son” (Galatians 4:30). The verb, ekballō, means to drive out or send away. In Abraham’s house it meant an actual departure. The reason given was inheritance. The son of the bondwoman would have no share as a fellow heir with the son of the freewoman.

What, then, must the Galatians send away? The demand that they submit to Sinai to establish their right to inherit. God had given the inheritance to Abraham by promise (Galatians 3:18). To make circumcision a condition now would place the heirs back under the covenant Paul had just identified with bondage. Peter had already faced the human cost of that demand. How could he place such a yoke on brothers to whom God Himself had given the Spirit?

The Law and the ministry of the Spirit

The Law is a photograph of Jesus. I think of a man treasuring the photograph of someone he has yet to meet. He studies the face because he hopes to recognize the person when the day comes. Jesus told men who searched the Scriptures that those very writings testified about Him, and that Moses had written of Him (John 5:39–47). Some who had learned Moses from childhood did recognize Jesus. Philip went looking for Nathanael with just that news (John 1:45). Others knew those same writings well and resisted the One to whom they bore witness. That possibility should search anyone who teaches the Bible, myself included.

Why, then, does Paul call the covenant engraved on stone a ministry of death? Look first at Moses' face. He had been with the Lord, and the Israelites could see the glory of that encounter upon him. Paul grants the glory of that ministry as freely as any Israelite could wish. In the same passage he calls it a ministry of condemnation. A holy commandment could bring my sin to light and pronounce a true judgment upon it. What it required of me, it could never produce in me. Paul places alongside it the surpassing glory of the ministry of the Spirit, who gives life (2 Corinthians 3:5–11).

I can delight in a commandment and still lack the power to obey it. Paul describes precisely that distress in Romans 7:22–23. His release comes through the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Notice where Paul says the righteous requirement of the Law finds fulfillment: "in us," as we walk according to the Spirit (Romans 8:2–4). I am fully accountable to King Jesus. When I have wronged a brother, life in the Spirit reaches all the way to the conversation in which I acknowledge what I did and seek his forgiveness.

We are to live by a Person. John says that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him (1 John 4:9). Follow those two words through the apostles' writings and consider how much of a believer's life they embrace.

Through Him we give our Amen to the promises that have their Yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). Through Him Paul finds the strength to be content with a full table or an empty one (Philippians 4:11–13). Through Him we draw near to God, knowing that the One who saves us lives to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25).

Through Him we offer praise, the fruit of lips that give thanks to God's name (Hebrews 13:15). Through Him we believe in the God who raised Him from the dead, and our hope rests in God (1 Peter 1:20–21). And when the writer of Hebrews prays that God will equip us to do His will, he asks God to work in us what pleases Him through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 13:20–21). Even the obedience for which I am accountable to my King depends upon His life at work in me.

The place where we draw near

Jacob was a traveler with a stone for a pillow when he dreamed of a stairway reaching from earth to heaven. He saw angels ascending and descending, and he heard the Lord renew His promise. In the morning Jacob marveled that the Lord had been in that place and he had been unaware of it. He called it the house of God and the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:10–19).

Now listen to Jesus speaking to Nathanael. The man who had sat under the fig tree has just confessed Him as the Son of God and the King of Israel. What greater thing could Jesus possibly show him? He reaches into the story of Jacob and promises that they will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:47–51). Read Jacob's dream once more, then come back to those last four words: "the Son of Man." The place in the dream that held Jacob's wondering gaze is occupied in Jesus' saying by a Person. Here is the One in whom heaven and earth meet.

A Samaritan woman put the question of place to Jesus in terms that mattered to her people. Her ancestors had worshiped on their mountain. The Jews said Jerusalem was the place to worship. Jesus honored what God had given Israel, telling her that salvation is from the Jews. Then He spoke of the hour, already dawning, when true worshipers would worship the Father in spirit and truth (John 4:19–24). Consider who heard those words. A woman at a well, carrying the history of a divided people, could hear from the Son Himself what kind of worshiper the Father seeks.

Now bring the woman's question back to Paul's words about our mother, the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26). What sort of city can a Samaritan woman and a son of Israel alike call home? The Son who spoke to her at the well has opened the way to His Father. Wherever the Father finds those who worship Him in spirit and truth, they already enjoy the very thing a pilgrim longs for when he sets out for a holy place.

And where does that leave us, saints? Hear the tense of the words in Hebrews 12:22: "You have come." Read on through verse 24. You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the gathered assembly, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. A believer may read those words in a crowded apartment, beside a hospital bed, or at a table set for one. In each of those places the invitation holds. Draw near to the Father through His Son. Then look again at the brother or sister beside you. The Lord who has welcomed you has made room for them too.

Here, then, is my answer to the accusation that opened this paper. Whom do I recognize as God's people? Those whom He has joined to His Son. Where do I find the life pictured in the Law? In Jesus Christ, through whom I live. And where is the holy place in which I may draw near? Saints, we have come to Mount Zion. The Son of Man whom Jacob's ladder pictured has brought us all the way to the Father.

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