

SECOND EDITION

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

LIVING IN THE GAP BETWEEN PROMISE AND REALITY

THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO

ABRAHAM

IAIN M. DUGUID

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PROMISE AND
REALITY

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

*A series of studies on the lives
of Old Testament characters, written for
laypeople and pastors, and designed to
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,
and preaching of the Old Testament*

IAIN M. DUGUID
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P U B L I S H I N G
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To the members of Redeemer Presbyterian Church,
Oxford (1992-95); with gratitude to God for our time
among you. May you always experience the full
measure of the joy of God's grace.

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FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

C oncerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10–12)

“Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
(Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and laypeople, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

IAIN M. DUGUID

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book could be written without the assistance and encouragement of numerous people. The temptation in writing this page, as with the acceptance speeches of Oscar-winning actors, is to try to give a complete listing of all those “without whom this would not have been possible.” Such a list would try the patience of reader and publisher alike, while still inevitably missing someone. So I will endeavor to be brief.

This book originated as a series of sermons preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Oxford, England; they were then updated and redelivered in a very different setting during a pastoral vacancy at Aliso Creek Presbyterian Church in Laguna Niguel, California. This second edition reflects the changes and development in my preaching over the past twenty years, and specifically my ministry at Christ Presbyterian Church in Grove City, where I returned to these foundational texts: I hope that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is even more prominent now than ever, and I want to thank all these congregations of God’s people for their encouragement and support.

The original series editors, Al Groves and Tremper Longman III, were also my teachers at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia; I therefore owe them a double debt. Thanks are due to Jim Scott and Thom Notaro at P&R Publishing for improving the readability of the manuscript of the first edition in numerous ways. Meanwhile, Amanda Martin helped considerably with the revisions for this second edition, some of which she listened to as a student at Grove City College. The faults and shortcomings, however, remain my own.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would particularly like to thank my wife, Barb, my most faithful and enthusiastic critic. She field-tested the material in a women's Bible study at New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido, California, and contributed many of the questions in the "For Further Reflection" sections. Without her love and constant support, I wouldn't be able to do what I do. Thanks are also due to my children—now expanded from five to six. Thank you, Wayne, Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Rob, and Rosie for keeping me firmly in touch with real life and reminding me of the things that are most important.

This book remains dedicated to the memory of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Oxford (1992–95). No fledgling pastor could ever have had a more loving and committed congregation. Of each member it could be said, as Paul said of Timothy, that they took a genuine interest in the welfare of one another and the wider community, not putting their own interests first, but those of Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:20–21). We still think of you with great affection twenty years later. Barb and I praise God for every remembrance of you all, and look forward to our reunion in heaven, when the full fruit of your labors in the Lord will be revealed.

SOLI DEO GLORIA

INTRODUCTION: LIVING IN THE REALITY GAP

How do you respond when you find yourself falling into the reality gap? How do you feel when there seems to be an immeasurable difference between what God has promised and what you see now? What do you do when the vision you once had of the way your life was supposed to work out seems to be crumbling into dust? It is easy to be a Christian in the sunshine of Palm Sunday, surrounded by the crowds chanting their praises to Jesus, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” But it is much harder to be a disciple in the gathering gloom on the road to Emmaus, puzzling over the death of the Messiah and not yet seeing how that death will lead to resurrection.

For most of us, much of our lives seems to be spent trudging along that dreary road to Emmaus. For one person, the reality gap may appear in the form of sudden and unexpected unemployment, with little prospect of another job. For another, it may come with sickness and crippling health problems. It may come to you through the death of a spouse or child. It may be caused by an intense frustration with the church in which God has placed you. Any or all of these circumstances may cause a crisis of faith in your life as you ponder the reality gap between what God has promised and the circumstances in which you find yourself. *Surely this isn't what life should be like as a Christian*, you think to yourself.

THE EMMAUS ROAD SERMON

Where can you turn when you experience a crisis of faith? What help is available to strengthen the faith of those who are caught in the reality gap, who feel stuck in a time warp along the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus? Perhaps the best reply to that question is the answer that Jesus himself gave to the disciples who first traveled along that dark road. After they recounted their puzzlement to him, not yet realizing who he was, Jesus responded,

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27)

In other words, Jesus gave them an Old Testament sermon that started with the writings of Moses (the first five books of the Bible) and continued through all the prophets (the rest of the Old Testament), showing them how the pattern of suffering followed by glory is continually interwoven through the threads of the history of God’s people. If these disciples had understood the Old Testament better, the death and resurrection of Jesus would not have come as such a shock. They would have been better equipped to face the tough realities of life with an unshakable faith in God. The same is true for us. If only you and I can grasp the message of the Old Testament more clearly, with its focus on the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow, we too will be better equipped to walk through this weary world of suffering, sin, pain, and loss on our journey bound for the Promised Land of heaven.

ABRAHAM AS OUR EXAMPLE

Where did Abraham fit into that Emmaus road sermon? Luke doesn't tell us the details, but it is hard to imagine that Abraham was overlooked by Jesus. Abraham is supremely the man of faith in the Old Testament. He, perhaps more than almost any other person in the Bible, knew what it means to live by faith in the face of overwhelming circumstances. In the pages of the book of Genesis, we find recorded for us the faith, and the failures, of a man like us, who lived in the gap between promise and reality.

Indeed, even in the Old Testament, Abraham was regarded as an exemplary figure. In Isaiah 51:2, the exiles in Babylon were urged to consider his experience as a model for their own: "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." Just as Abraham had been called by God from the city of Ur, against overwhelming odds, to enter the Promised Land, so also the exiles could rely on God to fulfill his promises to the patriarch. They could have faith that the God of Abraham would return them once again to that land, impossible though that seemed.

But the use of Abraham as an example goes back further than the exile. As we examine the narrative of Abraham, we shall find that his story was written to provide encouragement for the generation in the wilderness, those who were on an Emmaus journey of their own, stuck in the reality gap between being delivered out of Egypt and entering the Land of Promise. For them, too, Abraham provided both an example to follow and a warning to avoid sin. The fertility of Egypt was a sidetrack for Abraham, just as it was for them; the temptation to take shortcuts and "help God out" was very real for both; Abraham's call to exercise faith in the unseen reality of God's promise against all odds was a challenge for them to heed.

INTRODUCTION

But what about us? We do not live in the wilderness of Sinai, nor among the exiles of Babylon. What can we learn from Abraham? In Hebrews 3, the writer to the Hebrews shows us the fundamental analogy between our present spiritual position as Christians and that of the wilderness generation. We too have not yet entered our rest (4:6). We too run the risk of disobeying the gospel promise and falling short of God's blessing (3:12; 4:1). Although everything in creation is subject to the authority of Jesus, at present we often do not see that heavenly reality clearly reflected in our own earthly experience (2:8). We need to live by faith, just like our Old Testament forefathers (Heb. 11). So we too can learn a great deal from Abraham's example of how to live in the gap between promise and reality.

ABRAHAM AND THE GOSPEL

Yet if Abraham is only an example for us to follow, we are of all men most to be pitied. Who among us can live up to the standard of even a flawed hero such as Abraham? Thankfully, our salvation as Christians rests not on our trying to do what Abraham did, but on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross in our place, whereby our sins were atoned for, the wrath of God was turned away from us, and we were reconciled to him. To put it another way, the gospel is not "What would Abraham do?" but "What has Jesus done?" As we explore Abraham's life and faith, we will see not only how he provides positive and negative examples for us, but also how he acts as a forerunner and shadow, pointing forward to Christ.

This is, after all, the central thrust of the Emmaus road sermon. Jesus recounted for his disciples what Moses and the prophets had written, not because they were full of good examples for them to follow, but because they spoke of him. Specifically, they spoke of his sufferings and the glories that would follow. The whole Old Testa-

ment is thereby declared to be a thoroughly Christocentric book. This is true, not simply because there are superficial parallels between certain Old Testament events and events in the life of Jesus, but more profoundly because the whole Old Testament was designed by God to provide a context within which to understand the sufferings and glorification of Christ. Our greatest need, in order to live by faith in the midst of the reality gap, is not to have a good example to follow. Rather, what we need most is a growing understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, of his sufferings and the glory that followed, which provide the context for understanding and enduring our present sufferings with hope and unconquerable joy.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PREPARATION OF A SAINT (GENESIS 11:27–32)

The making of a tennis player does not begin the first time he or she steps onto Centre Court at Wimbledon; nor does the making of a concert violinist begin on stage at Carnegie Hall. Such careers begin much earlier than that, often in childhood. Making it to the top demands sacrificing much that others take for granted; while others play, they must work—on lobs and smashes, serves and backhands, scales and arpeggios, bowing and fingering. Without those years of preparation, they would never be ready for their big moment in the public eye, the goal to which their whole life has been heading. Indeed, it would be unfair to expect a top performance at the highest level from a beginner. Only those who have matured through long and sometimes tedious years of preparation are equipped to undertake such a searching test.

The same principle holds true in God's service. Like an astute coach or a gifted teacher, God prepares his saints for the tasks to which he has appointed them before he uses them. Moses, for example, spent forty years in the desert, herding sheep, before God called him to lead his

people out of Egypt. What better preparation in patience could there have been for his assignment of leading an equally stubborn flock of people through the wilderness for forty years? Similarly, David learned courage from his own experience as a shepherd. Later, the one who had learned how to take on wild animals in the defense of his flock would be called upon to take on the biggest wild animal of all, mighty Goliath, in the defense of God's flock. God knows how to prepare his people for the tasks to which they are assigned.

THE PREPARATION OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

The principle of preparation for service is also evident in the life of Abraham. We often miss this aspect of Abraham's story because we usually commence our reading of it at the beginning of Genesis 12, in which God speaks to Abraham for the first time. But that's not actually where his story begins. In the book of Genesis, the beginning of a major new section is frequently marked by the formula "These are the generations of . . ." So, for example, we find "These are the generations of Noah" (Gen. 6:9), "These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son" (25:19), and "These are the generations of Jacob" (37:2). Abraham's story is introduced by the same marker at Genesis 11:27: "These are the generations of Terah." We tend to skip over the verses that follow this announcement in order to get into the exciting material of Genesis 12. After all, aren't the intervening verses only about obscure genealogies and incidental details, which may be of interest to Old Testament experts but have nothing to say to ordinary people? By no means! In fact, quite the reverse is true. Genesis 11:27–32 gives us vital information about the background to the calling and subsequent career of Abraham.

You see, God's dealings with Abraham didn't start with him as a seventy-five-year-old about to set out on a journey

to Canaan. God didn't just slip down to Haran, looking for a suitable retiree to act as the father of his people. No, he had been preparing Abraham for a while—even though he (or Abram, as he was then known) was quite unaware of that fact. The circumstances are recorded for us in Genesis 11:31–32.

Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were 205 years, and Terah died in Haran.

We find out here that it was actually Abram's father, Terah, who first set out for Canaan, taking Abram with him. The Scriptures don't tell us why he wanted to make the move. This was a period of history in which there were great movements of population around the Middle East. Terah, Abram, and Lot would by no means have been alone in pulling up stakes and setting off in search of greener pastures. But they never made it to Canaan. For some reason—again, we're not told why—they stopped at Haran and settled there. Yet the idea of going to Canaan had been planted in Abram's mind. Through this experience of moving once from home and family in Ur, he was being prepared by God, so that when the call came to get up and move on to Canaan, he was ready. God had fitted him to hear his call and answer it.

Of course, Terah himself was not picked at random, either. The genealogy of Genesis 11:10–26 shows us that he came from the line of Shem, the son of Noah. He was a descendant of the very line in which God had been working for many generations. What is more, in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11:10–26, it is the tenth name that is the one of key significance. Noah, the one in whom the line of Adam was preserved through the flood, was the tenth

patriarch in the line from Adam. Abram was the tenth patriarch in the line of Shem, suggesting that through Abram a new deliverance would be set in motion.

God's plan from the beginning was to preserve for himself a godly line, through whom the promise of a redemptive offspring of Eve would ultimately be granted (Gen. 3:15). God planned that this "seed" of the woman would ultimately triumph over Satan and his cohorts. This godly line was soon endangered from without and within. Angered by the acceptance of his brother's offering, Cain killed his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:8). But God responded by giving Eve another child, or, more literally, "another seed" (4:25). When humanity became utterly corrupt within a few generations, God kept Noah safe through the flood, so that the line of promise could continue (Gen. 6–9). Yet even the judgment of the flood had no power to change humanity. Almost the first thing Noah did when he emerged from the ark was to get drunk, and the pattern of ongoing sin climaxed in the tower that mankind built in Babylon as an expression of their united pride and arrogance—the so-called Tower of Babel.

Abram was born and grew up in that hotbed of idolatry, in Ur, and the Bible tells us that his family was not immune from its temptations. In Joshua 24:2, we read, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods." But God would not give up on rebellious humanity. With Abram, the time came for the next phase in the history of redemption. Although Abram may have been unaware of the ways in which God had prepared him for his task, everything was ready.

Sarah (or Sarai, as her parents had named her) was being prepared as well, in the school of hard knocks for women. Genesis 11:30 tells us, "Now Sarai was barren." And then the writer repeats himself (just in case you missed it the first time around): "She had no child." Not to be able to have children in a society where a woman's value was

measured by her fertility was a bitter blow indeed. Sarai must have shed many bitter tears over her inability to bear children. But, paradoxically, her inability in this area was a crucial part of God's preparation of her for her role in his plan. In order for her to be the mother of the child of promise, it was necessary for her to be unable to bear children *without* the direct intervention of God.

OUR PREPARATION

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul describes us as God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." That raises the question, "For what good works is God preparing you?" Your answer right now may well be, "I haven't a clue." God's purposes are certainly not always transparent at the time. Moses probably had no idea why he was stuck in the desert with the sheep. He must have felt permanently sidelined. Likewise, David had little idea of the future greatness for which he was being fitted. Abram could scarcely have discerned the higher hand bringing him from Ur to Haran, and Sarai's tears were not answered with an explanation of the need for her present pain. Only later, with the benefit of hindsight, would they be able to look back and discern how God had indeed done all things well in their lives. In the meantime, they simply had to cling to God, believing, though not understanding.

An awareness of the way in which God frequently works may similarly provide a vital perspective on our own experience. The situation in which we find ourselves may well be a key part of God's preparation of us for the task to which he will call us at some point in the future. But it may be only as we look back that we will come to understand how it all works into God's plan for our lives. In the meantime, we may simply have to cling to God, believing, though not understanding.

AN EXAMPLE

Let me give a small example from my own experience. When I felt God calling me to the ministry at the age of seventeen, a vital part of that call was Romans 15:20, where Paul proclaims, "I make it my ambition to preach the gospel." As a teenager, God impressed that verse upon my heart as a call to me personally to share Paul's ambition. Over the years, however, I came to recognize that I had latched on to only half of what Paul is really saying. His full statement is, "Thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation."

In other words, what Paul is actually proclaiming is not so much his commitment to preaching the gospel as his commitment to church planting. This fact came home to me only as I sat in front of a congregation of people, about to tell them that the Lord was apparently opening the doors for us to go to Oxford, England, to plant a church there. I almost fell off my chair when I made the connection! What we had considered to be the outcome of a series of strange twists and turns in our lives, when we had frequently been unsure of what the long-term future held, now seemed to have been in the Lord's mind all along, even though we had had no idea of it! What a comfort it was then, and throughout our time in Oxford, to be assured that God had brought us there for his purposes.

It may be the same for you, too. The experiences in which you find yourself now may very well turn out to be God's preparing of you for the good works he has planned for you to do later. That's a great encouragement, isn't it? Of course, a caution is necessary at this point: we must not elevate our reading of God's working through circumstances into authoritative guidance; we can easily be wrong! We must not forget that the Bible is the only infallible rule in our lives. No matter how clear the Lord's leading may seem

to us, we are still called upon to subject our understanding of it to the Scriptures and also to the wisdom and discernment of the wider body of Christ. But when circumstances do work together to point us in a particular direction, or to show us how God has indeed worked things together for our good, we should take encouragement from them and thank the Lord for them.

Praise God that he prepares his people through many different circumstances before he calls them to any task! By the way, that's not just a lesson for young people to learn. Moses and Abram were still in their preparation stage long after most people have retired!

PREPARATION DOES NOT GUARANTEE "SUCCESS"

But even lengthy preparation does not guarantee immediate success. Although God prepared Abram and Sarai to hear his call, and then called them to become a great nation through which blessing would come to all nations, for a long time all that distinguished them from their neighbors was the promise of God. There was no halo of glory surrounding their camels as they traveled from Haran to Canaan; nor was there a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them, as Israel had coming out of Egypt. At a time when many other people were traversing the Near East, they appeared to be just another group of travelers. Only the promise of God marked them out as different.

It's the same way today, isn't it? What marks you out from your non-Christian neighbors? You're not smarter than they are; you're not richer; you're not better looking or healthier. You experience many of the same kinds of problems and crises that they do. So what marks you out as different? Only the promises of God do. If you're a Christian, you know that God is working in you and through you to achieve his purposes in the world. If you're a Christian,

you know that “for those who love God all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28).

It is precisely the existence of such promises that makes the experience of the reality gap so intense. For the non-Christian, there is logically no reality gap. His or her life may be going well or it may not, but either way it has no meaning. If one is simply a chance collocation of atoms, there is no reason why one’s life should go well or why one’s sufferings should have any significance. There is no promise that the non-Christian can claim. He or she is left simply hoping against hope that everything will turn out all right in the end, whatever “right” is. The Christian, however, is different. He or she knows that God is in control of all things and that, even if all appearances are to the contrary, God has a plan in which all things in heaven and under heaven will work out for his glory and our good. It is precisely our faith that creates the reality gap when we don’t understand how particular trials or circumstances will work out.

STAYING STRONG IN THE REALITY GAP

So how do you stay strong in the midst of the reality gap, when you find yourself drowning in painful feelings, dire circumstances, or broken relationships? That was our situation when the little church plant in Oxford that God had so clearly called us to plant closed down after only three years. How could God call us to do something and then let it “fail”? Shouldn’t God bless us when we step out in faith to pursue his will? It’s a question to which I still come back repeatedly as I struggle with failures in my own life—patterns of sin and self-centeredness that continue to hurt my marriage or my children, or damage the church and seem to threaten it in one way or another. God’s plan is wonderful, but I am not; my circumstances often seem to

conspire against me; people are often recalcitrant and difficult. How can I really believe that God is going to work all this mess for good?

How do you stay strong in the reality gap? The answer is simple—at least in theory. You cling to the promises of God and the God of the promises. You don't have to understand what God is up to; you just have to cling. That is the lesson that Abraham had to learn. Like so many of us, he had to learn the lesson not once, not twice, but repeatedly. It took him a while to catch on. But we have an advantage over Abraham. We have the whole history of God's faithful dealings with his people, recorded in the Scriptures for our instruction. What is more, God's promises to us have been signed and sealed in the broken body and shed blood of Christ. Abraham had to leave his home and his family on the strength of the bare word of God's call. We have this further assurance: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

The good news for weak people like us is that even clinging to the promises is not ultimately left up to us. God is not holding his breath, waiting to see whether our strength will be sufficient to hold on to him in the midst of life's storms. He holds us firmly in the grip of his grace, and he will not let us go. Though we may indeed be "tempted, tried and sometimes failing,"¹ as the hymn writer put it, he is the one whose strength wins the victory. So it is that we see Jesus not only showing us how to have faith in the reality gap, but also exercising that faith for us in our place. Jesus left the glories of heaven and came to earth, where he learned humility through obedient suffering. The incarnation began a thirty-year-long preparation period for Jesus, an apprenticeship in suffering and humility. The all-perfect God had never suffered before. Yet as a child, he stubbed his toe and stepped on sharp rocks. He experienced cruelty and rejection. He was misunderstood and misrepresented. All these very human and very painful experiences were

necessary as a preparation for his great work of becoming our heavenly High Priest, representing us before the Father.

Jesus stayed strong in the face of abandonment and betrayal. Even as his closest disciples left him and fled, Jesus cried out in faith, “Father. . . not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). He stayed strong even to the point at which the Father himself turned his face away from him and left him all alone in the darkness—surely the greatest test of faith that this world has ever seen. In the depths of that darkness, he cried out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). His faith never failed; he always clung firmly to his Father’s unseen hand. And he did so in order that you and I, whose faith so often falters at the slightest hurdle, might be welcomed into God’s presence as beloved sons and daughters, clothed in his perfect obedience.

That is why it is such an encouragement for us to gather around the Lord’s Table. We come as those who are marked out from the world by the promises of God and by faith partake of the sign and seal of the promise. There we remember that Christ died for us. We remember that there is no forgiveness anywhere else, nor do we need any other resource. There we remember that Jesus Christ is coming back to bring us to his heavenly home, where we will gather at another feast in his presence, when the gap between promise and reality will finally be closed once and for all. There we worship in awe at God’s stubborn grace, his inexplicable love for sinners, whom he slowly, patiently, and thoroughly turns into saints who can stand forever in his presence.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How would the fact that Abram had already set out once for Canaan make obedience to God’s call easier when it came?

2. How did God prepare the following characters in biblical history for their place in his plans: Joseph (Gen. 37–46), Moses (Ex. 2–14), David (1 Sam. 16–20), Esther (Esth. 2–4), and Paul (Acts 7:54–9:31)?
3. How has God prepared you for the work he has given you to do?
4. What might God be doing in your life right now to prepare you for his service in the future?
5. Are you sometimes afraid of what God may ask you to do? If so, why?
6. How does this passage of Scripture encourage you to trust God more?

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