

Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation: The Issue of Race and the Gospel of Grace (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹ Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³ And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴ and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵ And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.” (Rev 5:1–10)

A Time of Unrest

- A. Let me begin just by saying that I myself have personally never lived through such a time of unrest—physical, economic, cultural, social, racial . . . unrest. In the midst of one national, even global, crisis we come to face yet another one.
 - 1. On the one hand, as I’ve said, we’re dealing with a virus coming in at us from outside, a physical issue attacking our bodies—namely, COVID-19.
 - 2. On the other hand, we’re also now dealing with a virus that’s coming at us from the inside out, a spiritual issue that poisons and rots the heart—namely, racism.

- B. Now, I’m not usually the type to interrupt a sermon series in order to specifically address this or that current event. I’m not interested in burrowing down into every cultural rabbit hole.
 - 1. I like to keep us centered on God and His word and the exposition of Scripture, and I trust, from there, that we shall find relevant application to whatever’s going on around us in the present.
 - a. But, that being said, every now and then there are times where the cultural moment is just simply screaming to be addressed, and any pastor who cares for his people

will help them think biblically about it—will bring God and His word and gospel to bear on the pressing matters at hand.

- C. And, again, it just so happens that such a screaming moment has occurred twice now—back to back, one on top of the other.
 - 1. So a few months ago, some of you may recall, we were pressing along quite nicely in the gospel of Luke (and I have every intention of getting back to that, Lord willing), but then COVID-19 happened.
 - a. And I thought, I can't just keep going on with business as usual. I need to pull out of the previous sermon series and start another in an effort to speak specifically into the fear and the anxiety and the questions that I suspect this pandemic is going to bring. So we started our "Do Not Be Afraid . . ." series, and I hope you've found it helpful and reorienting during these frightening times.
 - 2. But then, having already adjusted my sermons to speak into that crisis, as I've said, yet one more crisis is now upon us. And so, here we are again, hitting pause on yet another previous sermon series in an effort to address the pressing matters at hand.
 - a. Now, to be clear, I'm not anticipating a whole new sermon series here, but I do have another sermon for you on this subject coming after Father's Day.

Distressing and Dizzying Days

- A. My sense is that these have been, for all of us, both distressing and dizzying days:
 - 1. When I say distressing, I mean . . . watching Derek Chauvin with his hands in his pockets kneeling casually on George Floyd's neck while the man's life slowly drained out of him, all but ripped the heart out of my chest and the chests of so many in this country.
 - a. And we've watched and, perhaps even participated, as protesters hit the streets in city after city, and, in fact, country after country all around the world (protests have taken place in over sixty countries at this point).
 - i. That's what I mean when say this has been distressing.
 - 2. When I say dizzying, I mean . . . in all of this you can really lose your balance. You turn on this news channel and you start feeling this way. Then you turn on that news channel and you start feeling that way.
 - a. So you turn off the news altogether and, inevitably, you start to scroll through your Facebook feed or whatever, and it starts all over again, only now it's more personal, because these are your friends speaking their mind. And this one's angry at that one. And that one's angry at this one.
 - i. And you're just imbalanced and disoriented by the noise of it all. Not sure how to interpret it, feel about it, respond to it.

- B. And, of course, the big issue here is that, in the midst of all the noise, we can so easily miss where God is in it all. We can miss His heart in these things.
 - 1. It's been a prayer of mine that we would be spending more time in God's word and in prayer than we would watching the news and scrolling through social media.
 - a. The point, of course, isn't so that we would have our heads buried in the sand. Not at all! The hope is that if we spend time alone with God to process these things, we would be able to step back towards the news the city streets and the culture with our feet on a firm foundation—able to be agents of peace and grace, speaking words seasoned with salt.

Regaining Our Balance

- A. So this is my job. To help us regain our balance, our footing, so that we can get God's heart for these things and be His people on His mission in it all.
- B. And if I could just say a word up front: I feel totally insufficient for such a task. I've probably never felt more inadequate as a pastor than I have in recent weeks.
 - 1. I am ashamed to say that there is much on the issue of race and racism that I've yet to truly give myself to working through intellectually, emotionally, practically—and this is likely because I've not been immediately affected by it. So I've got a lot of listening and learning to do.
 - a. I don't know what it's like to be a person of color in America today.
 - b. I don't know what it's like living in a country where, at least historically, my ancestors were treated like property, or even worse than property.
 - c. I don't know to what degree this racism still subsists systemically even today.
- C. I don't know a lot of things. But I think I know something about the Bible, so that's all I've got to work with. And that's what I'm going to bring to the table this morning.
 - 1. I want us to get a sense from Scripture of God's love for all peoples. I want you to be able to see clearly from God's Word, why racism runs so contrary to His heart and plan.
- D. So that's what we're going to do. The title of this sermon is: Every Tribe, Tongue, People, and Nation: The Issue of Race and the Gospel of Grace. This is part one of two. And I've got two items on the agenda for us: (1) Learning the Story; and (2) Living in Step.
 - 1. In the first, I'm going to take us through storyline of Scripture and show you God's heart for all peoples. This is really where we'll spend almost all our time this morning. Just laying a theological foundation.
 - 2. And then, in the second, I'll really only just get us started considering the implications that spin out from this worldview. We'll come back next week and do a lot more with that one. So let's go!

(1) Learning the Story

- A. I have found it helpful when trying to conceive of the whole storyline of the Bible to break it down into four chapters: (1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Redemption; and (4) Consummation. So what we're going to do here is run the idea of race and ethnicity through these four chapters and see what we learn.

Chapter #1: Creation

In the Beginning, God . . .

- A. Before we can talk about creation, really, we must first talk about God Himself. After all, that's really where the Bible begins: "In the beginning, God . . ." (Gen 1:1).
- B. And what we need to understand here about God is that He is within Himself a picture of unity in diversity. It's really what in Christian orthodoxy we've come to talk about as the trinity. He is one and three at that same time.
1. And what's notable is that though this doctrine certainly becomes more and more clear as the biblical narrative unfolds, it is hinted at right here at the outset in creation. For what do we have here?
 - a. We have this person called God.
 - b. But immediately we also read of another person. Gen 1:2: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." So God is there, and His Spirit is somehow set apart as if another person hovering over the water.
 - c. And creation takes place we know by way of His word, whom John would later equate with Jesus, the logos, the word, the Son of God: " ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1–3).
- C. So already at the beginning there is this sense that God is within Himself a unity in diversity—one God, three persons. Now hold onto that, because it really sets the stage for all that follows.

Man in the Image of God

- A. But now here we come to creation itself. God shapes and sets apart these various realms as it were—sky and sea and land and then He proceeds to fill them with all manner of life—vegetation and fish and animals.
1. But then the climax of it all, the very last thing He creates, day 6, is man—human beings. And here He says something of us that He says of nothing else in all creation. Listen in, Gen 1:26-28a: " ²⁶Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the

livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.²⁸ And God blessed them.”

- B. This idea of being created in the image of God implies something about both (1) our identity; and (2) our purpose.
1. In terms of our identity it means that we have this special relationship with and value to God. It means that human beings, above all other creatures have a certain dignity and worth that nothing else in all creation has. Imagine this: God has put something of Himself upon you, within you.
 2. In terms of our purpose, well this idea of being created in God’s image, it means people are to look at us and see something Him. We are to reflect His glory into the world round about us—in the way that we relate, and love, and cultivate, and co-rule with Him in creation.
 - a. It really is a staggering thought. It’s why David responds the way he does when he reflects on this reality in Psa 8: “³When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet . . .” (vv. 3–6).
- C. Now, for the sake of our purposes this morning, there are really two more things we must see here:
1. First, the image of God is not given to Adam merely, but to Adam and Eve, together, male and female. In fact, it would seem because God Himself is a unity in diversity, as it were, in order for His image to be properly put on display in humanity there must be this same sort of thing with us as well. Hence, again, it’s not just the male that is created in the image of God, but male and female together. Did you catch that? “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).
 - a. Unity and yet diversity. Not just male but also female. And both together present something of God’s image that they couldn’t on their own.
 2. But we could keep going, and indeed we must. For this diversity among human beings extends beyond just the gender distinction. We come to see as Scripture unfolds that all human beings—whatever culture, ethnicity, race—are all together created in the image of God.
 - a. There comes to be great diversity among human beings, but at bottom there is still this fundamental unity in terms of creation. We have all been made in the image of God—every single one of us; ascribed by Him with dignity and value, called to share in His purposes for the world. One is not better than the other.
 - i. And what this means is that however we want to talk about various races and things among humanity, at bottom, according to Scripture there really

is only one race, the human race. So Paul says in [Acts 17:26](#): “[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth . . .” One race . . . all in God’s image.

- D. When you walk by another human being—regardless of color, culture, or creed—you walk by an image-bearer of God. Let that sink in.

Chapter #2: Fall

- A. But, in many ways, things fracture in the fall. It’s as if, in our sin, we shatter the mirror of this image, and we no longer reflect God the way we ought. Now, we may be diverse, and we may all still have been created in God’s image, but, whatever else we are, we are certainly not united.
 - 1. We watch it happen first in [Gen 3](#), where part of the effect of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God is that they actually turn on each other. Male and female, no longer united but at odds. “The woman you gave me, she made me do it!” (cf. [v. 12](#)).
 - 2. And then in [Gen 4](#), it’s sibling rivalry and murder with Cain and Abel. The breakdown of marriage, the breakdown of family.
 - 3. And then, when we come to [Gen 11](#), we see the beginnings of the breakdown between peoples, other nations, and races.
- B. Perhaps, you’re familiar with the story of the Tower of Babel. It’s particularly relevant to our discussion this morning, because up to this point it would seem, there wasn’t much variation in culture, or language, or race.
 - 1. In fact, we’re told that, at this point, “[the whole earth had one language and the same words](#)” ([v. 1](#)). And the people were all together in one place, strangely enough, on the surface it would seem . . . united.
 - a. But here’s the catch: They were united all right, but united together not with or for God, but against Him.
- C. At Babel, we have this sort of coalition of rebel humanity, gathered together in opposition of God, seeking to build a tower to heaven, as it were, to overthrow Him and make a name, not for Him, but for themselves.
 - 1. You see, as far as sinful human beings go, there is not much we agree upon, but at bottom there is this one thing at least: We don’t want God in our lives . . . we want to be god of our lives.
 - a. Ironically, it’s this fundamental unity in the human race in their enmity with God that gives rise to our division everywhere else.
 - i. And it makes sense when you stop to think of it. If I want to be god, and you want to be god, well, there’s a big problem there, isn’t there? Because, at the end of the day, there can only be one. And Lord knows it’s going to

be me. So we push and pull and shoot and stab and tear down and oppress and do what we have to do to get on top.

- D. Well, when God catches wind of what humanity is up to, we're told He comes down and puts an end to it. Like a boot coming down on an army of ants. The boot drops and the ants scatter.
 - 1. They get in essence the natural consequence of their behavior. Disunity, division, and so forth. We're told that God confused their language and dispersed them from there over the face of the earth (v. 9).
 - a. And it's here, biblically speaking, we understand that the various subsets of race and ethnicity and things begin to take shape. Culture, language, arts begin to develop differently in different places. Physical characteristics differentiate one group from another.
- E. Here's the tragic irony in all of this: In our conjoined attempt to be like God apart from God, we become less and less like Him and less and less like each other. There's more animosity, arrogance, conflict, spite, enmity in every direction.
 - 1. This brothers and sisters is the human condition, and it's playing out all over the news, all over the streets, these days, is it not?!

Chapter #3: Redemption

Abraham

- A. [Gen 11](#) is quickly followed by [Gen 12](#). You see, God, while holy and just, doesn't delight in punishing the wicked. He delights in showing mercy and grace, in restoring what's been broken.
- B. So He sets this sort of thing in motion straightaway—with a man named Abraham. God promises to make of Him a great nation. And, in this way, Abraham becomes the headwaters of the chosen people of Israel.
 - 1. But what does God promise Him? What's His big plan for this people? What's God doing here? Playing favorites? Is God just as racist as anyone else? Far from it. [Gen 12:1-3](#): “¹ Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.’² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
 - a. “I will make from you a blessed nation so that you may be a blessing to all the nations. All the nations that spun out from Babel—listen Abraham, we're going after them! And it starts right here.”
- C. Even when Israel loses their way and falls time and time again into prejudice and ethnocentrism and things, God continues to speak boldly of such a plan for the nations, even nations that have historically been Israel's enemies and things.

1. Have you ever noticed this in the prophets? Take [Isa 19:24-25](#) for example: “²⁴ In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵ whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

- a. Egypt enslaved Israel. Assyria sent Israel into exile. And yet here God is saying: “In the end, Egypt, you will be my people, Assyria, you will be blessed in me . . . every bit as much as Israel ever was. I’m bringing the nations in!”

- D. But if Israel gets caught up in gets caught up in prejudice and ethnocentrism, and many are even resisting this idea, how is God going to do it?

Jesus

- A. Well, in the line of Abraham, comes Jesus, the Son of God, the perfect man, an unbroken mirror and image of His Father’s glory. He would fulfill the promise made to Abraham, the prophecy made by Isaiah. He would bring blessing to Israel and blessing to the world.

1. And He would do it by giving Himself up to death, even death on a cross—not for His own sins, but for ours.

- B. Now, you’ve got to hear me on this. The way God goes about reversing the curse of Babel is so profound in this moment.

1. You see, just like at Babel, so at Calvary around that cross, all mankind is joined together, as it were, with a strange and sinister unity of purpose—to get God out of our face and off the throne. There they are, Jew and Gentile, united for this devilish end. As the disciples say in [Acts 4:27](#): “[T]ruly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel . . .”

- a. They’re all there. That’s the only thing fallen humanity could ever agree about. “I don’t want God messing up my plans for my life. Your enemy is my enemy. Crucify Him!”

- C. And the amazing thing about our God, and this gospel of grace, is that He takes this most vile expression of our pride, and our rebellion, and our enmity, and He uses it to truly restore us and reunite us with Himself and with one another.

1. So the day of Pentecost arrives. Jesus has already risen from the dead, ascended to His Father, and He proceeds to pour out the Holy Spirit upon the church. And what happens?

- a. Well the disciples start speaking in tongues—in the languages “[from every nation under heaven](#),” Luke tells us (cf. [Acts 2:5](#)). And because it was a festival time in Israel, pilgrims had come into Jerusalem from all over the world. And they heard these Christians speaking in their own native language, praising and extolling God—

no doubt speaking of Christ and the cross and the resurrection. And you see they understood it!

- i. The curse of Babel was being overturned through Jesus and the gospel. It's a picture of the beginning of all that God said He would do. He's going to pour out His blessing through Israel on all the nations. And He's going to bring them together, as diverse and variegated as they are, as one. We're being renewed in the image of God and united in Him through Christ.

Chapter #4: Consummation

- A. So now we fast forward to the consummation, the end of all things, and this leads us finally to the text I opened with. It's this very dramatic scene in heaven.
 1. There's this scroll in the hand of God. Sealed with seven seals. The idea here, I think, is that this scroll contains God's plan and purpose for the world. But it can't be opened, it can't be unrolled, because no one can break the seals.
 - a. So John the apostle, the one having this vision, is weeping loudly. "Who's going to take God's plan to its climax, who's going to fulfill His purpose for human history? No one?!"
- B. It would seem so, until suddenly there appears "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (Rev 5:6)—such a curious description, depicting in vivid imagery the reality that Jesus, the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the world, has conquered ironically through His death.
 1. Then John realizes here is the One who can break the seals and open the scroll. Here is the One who can usher in the fulfillment of God's plan.
- C. And, of course, we are given some clues as to what exactly this plan entails when the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders erupt with a new song sung to Jesus: "⁹ Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (vv. 9-10).
 1. What's the climax of God's plan? To bring people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation, every race, back to Himself and back into a humble, loving, united relationship with one another. That's why Jesus died! That's why Jesus shed His blood. For this!

(2) Living in Step

- A. It's going to be the climax of world history at the end of the age, but it's begun already today. Which is why we have to learn to live in step with it.
- B. This biblical metanarrative, this gospel, it sets out a path for you and I as the people of God to walk out on. It makes abundantly plain how we ought to feel about and how we ought to be treating people of other races. There is absolutely no room for partiality, prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism.

1. When Peter the apostle, even after getting the gospel, and being saved by it himself, starts falling back into His Jewish ethnocentric ways and begins to distance himself from the Gentiles, Paul confronts him to his face, we're told in [Gal 2](#). Why? Because, he says, "their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14).
 - a. Prejudice, racism, and the gospel are incompatible.
- C. All have been created in God's image, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, all have been so loved by God that He sent His only Son to be slain on their behalf.
 1. How could we who have received of this free, unmerited grace, then turn on our fellow image-bearers with disdain for their differences of skin, or culture, or socioeconomic status, or whatever?!
- D. We're going to flesh this idea out much more next week, and we'll look at some of the implications that spin out from this. If this is the story, if this is the metanarrative, if this is the gospel, what does it mean, with regard to race, to live in step with it?