

# The Beginning of Wisdom: An Introduction to Christian Thought and Life

## **Chapter 10: Practical Wisdom**

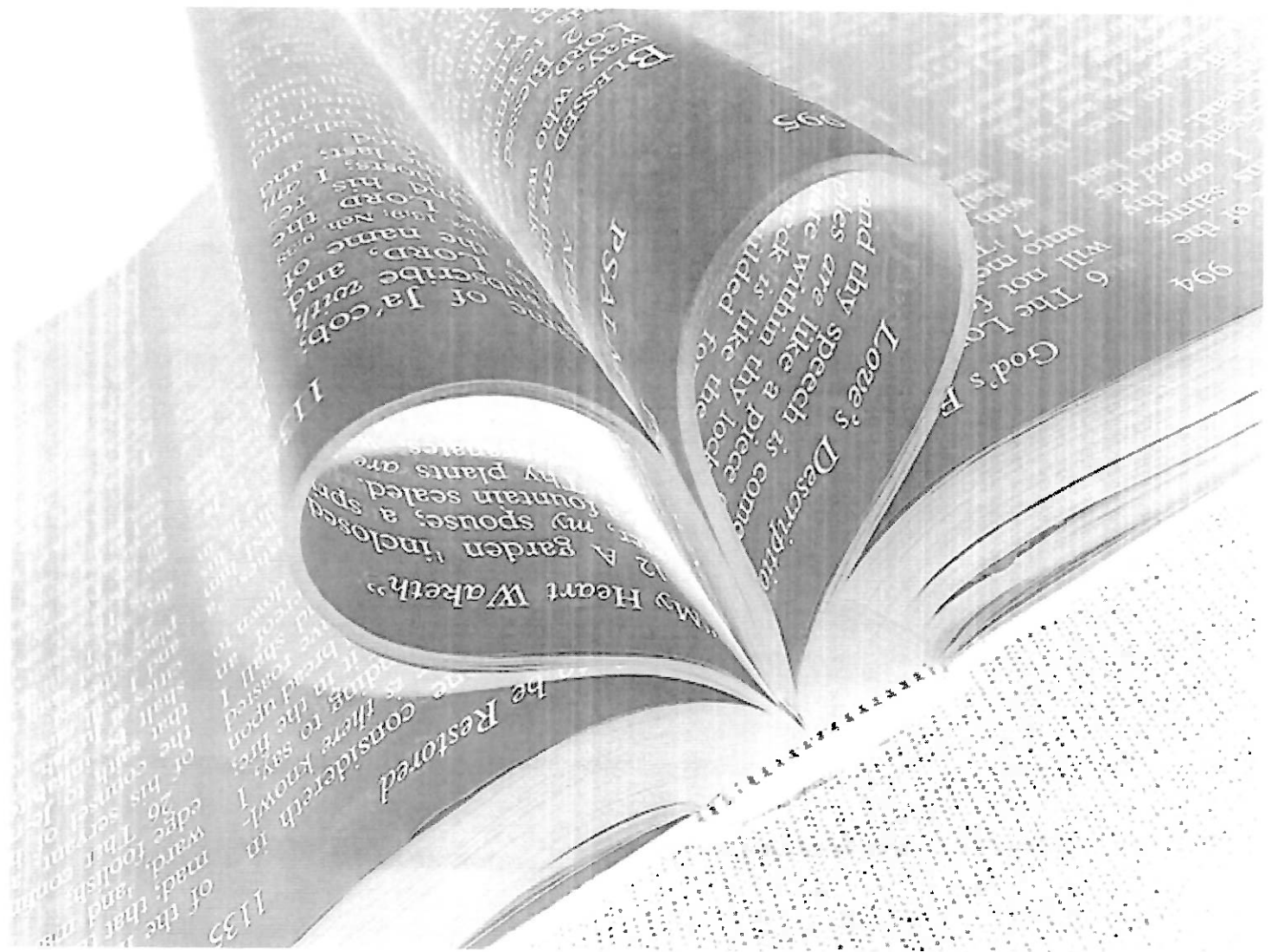
By Michele Pasley

*"And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'" —  
Revelation 21:5 (English Standard Version)*

### **Essential Questions**

- What does the Bible say about God's kingdom and God's mission in the world?
- What does the Bible say about God's call to people to join him on mission and to be disciples of Jesus?

### **Introduction**



Creation, fall, redemption, **restoration**: The four acts of the Christian Story, or **metanarrative**, explain God's work in human history and form an overview of the Christian worldview. God's Story did not end in the first century; God has continued working through the past 2,000 years, and God is still writing the Story today. Just as people in the past had a part in the Story, so do people today. Chapters 10 and 11 center on restoration, the fourth act of the Story, with a focus on God's continuing work of restoring broken people, communities, and eventually, all creation so that they are brought to wholeness characterized by God's love, justice, beauty, and wisdom.

## **Restoration: The Fourth Act of the Biblical Story**

The biblical story began with God's love, grace, creativity, and wisdom overflowing in the ordered work of creation, culminating in the creation of human beings (Genesis 1). God, in his wisdom, created man and woman to be co-rulers over creation, remaining faithful to the love, justice, beauty, design, and order that God initiated from the very beginning (Genesis 1:26–30). However, humanity failed to remain faithful to the wisdom of God's design for creation, and instead, chose to do things their own way, departing from wisdom by turning away from God through disobedience. Humanity fell and began to live under the curse of sin (Genesis 3). Instead of a beautiful creation operating under the fullness of love and justice, brokenness, pain, and suffering entered the world. Rather than wisely caring for the created world as partners, sin fractured the relationship between men and women and resulted in power struggles and the domination of one sex over another (Genesis 3). The choice to depart from wisdom and to choose

sin caused brokenness then and continues to cause brokenness today; however, brokenness does not have the last word. Out of his great love, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem the world. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus provided redemption from sin and restoration from brokenness, both for individuals and for the whole of creation (Romans 5; Colossians 1:19–20; Hebrews 8–10; 1 John 4:9–10). The world is being set right; things broken by the curse of sin are being overturned and restored. Men and women no longer have to live with one dominating the other. People can now live free from the power of sin and destruction and live in right relationship with each other, just like in Eden before the fall into sin. There is hope that one day everything will be full of goodness again and creation will be realigned to the wisdom of God's design. The process has begun and will continue until the eventual restoration of all things, when everything is made new—new heavens, new Earth, and new bodies for people (Revelation 21–22).

Today, the world still bears the scars and brokenness of humanity's choice of sin instead of wisdom and obedience; however, sin no longer has the power it once did. Jesus conquered sin and death through his sacrificial death and the power of his resurrection, and now he is setting everything right. Jesus came proclaiming the reality of God's kingdom and inviting people to life within the kingdom where Jesus the King rules with love, grace, mercy, justice, and wisdom. The invitation to life in the kingdom is extended to all people. Life in the kingdom is characterized not by sin and brokenness, but by healing and wholeness. God invites all people to be redeemed restored and changed. As discussed in Chapter 5, Jesus paid the penalty for people's sin with his sacrifice on the cross, redeeming them from the bondage of sin to freedom and new life. God's Story is not finished. It is still lived out day-by-day, hour-by-hour, and minute-by-minute. People today have a place in the Story. This chapter will explore how people today fit within the fourth act of God's Story, and what it means for people, as individuals and communities, to live wisely.

## The Kingdom of God

The **Kingdom of God** is central to Jesus's message of hope, wholeness, and wisdom, but throughout history, people have often used the term in ways that Jesus never intended. While the Kingdom of God is crucial to God's story of restoration, it is one of the most misunderstood and misused concepts in history. Within the Christian worldview, living according to the values of the kingdom means living according to the practical wisdom of God's design for humanity and the rest of his creation. Thus, it is important to understand what Jesus meant by the term Kingdom of God and what it means to live in the Kingdom of God today.

When Jesus began his public ministry, he came teaching about God's kingdom, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Another way of translating Jesus's message is to say "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15, New International Version). Through Jesus, God came near to people. Jesus, who was fully God, became fully human and walked among people in a particular time and place. He fully embodied the name Immanuel ("God with us") prophesied centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14, English Standard Version). Jesus, the king of the kingdom was not distant, but had come near. As he came, he called the people to believe the good news that God was with them and the broken world would be restored. The invitation he extended to people in the past is still an invitation to people today: Have a change of mind, and choose to move from living in the kingdom of this world to living in the Kingdom of God. Move from brokenness to wholeness. Move from despair to hope. Move from sin to freedom. Move from death to life.

The idea of a kingdom can seem foreign to Westerners in the 21st century, but to Jesus's original hearers in first-century Palestine, the concept was not alien at all. In the first century, people lived under the rule of kings and emperors. In the small country of Israel, the people were ruled by a king who had been appointed by the Roman emperor. Ultimately, Rome was the ruling power, and since its conquest of Israel, the Jewish people had longed for freedom. Revolts had been common since the second century B.C., as the Jews tried to throw off the rule of their captors and reestablish an independent kingdom. When Jesus arrived on the scene, people were expecting the Messiah who had been promised through the Old Testament to deliver them from Roman rule (Matthew 21:1–11; Acts 1:6).

Indeed, Jesus did come to set people free and to usher them into his kingdom, but his kingdom did not look like what they expected. Rather than freeing people from Rome, he freed people from sin. God's sovereign, saving rule of generous love had come to take back the world that had been captured by evil, corruption, and decay (N.T. Wright, personal communication, 2014). Whether people lived as citizens in Rome or slaves in Israel, as subjects of God's kingdom, they could be free from sin and the powers that had held them in spiritual, emotional, and relational bondage. The kingdom in which Jesus is king is not and has never been restricted by geography; the kingdom is not a place, but the "fact that God rules" (Wright, 1999, p. 6). God is present and actively reigning in the world (Willard, 2014) and everyone and everything that by choice or by nature follows the principles of his rule is within his kingdom (Willard, 1998). People anywhere can choose to live under the presence, rule, and influence of God, embracing freedom from the power of sin and a life marked by love, justice, beauty, grace, and wisdom.

Over the past 2,000 years, people have repeatedly tried to force the Kingdom of God into a physical kingdom. For example, in 313 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine issued an edict declaring that Christianity was legal, which set the stage for its later adoption as the official religion of the empire. When Christianity became a state religion placed under the control of human rulers, the message of Jesus became diluted and distorted, and in some cases, people began to be Christian in name only. During the Middle Ages, crusaders from Europe cut a path of destruction through the ancient Near East, erroneously assuming that God's kingdom should be a physical kingdom under their control, abusing people through their misunderstanding and misuse of the term Kingdom of God. At times, people in Europe and North America have tried to combine the state and the church in an attempt to form the Kingdom of God in their own political image. These misunderstandings of the Kingdom of God have caused turmoil, suffering, and destruction for many people throughout the centuries and have caused people to reject the true kingdom because of the impact of false kingdoms.

## **The Wisdom of God's Kingdom**

The wisdom of God's kingdom is often perceived as foolishness to the world (1 Corinthians 1:26–31) because the values of the kingdom, and the definition of wisdom within the kingdom, differ from the way the broken world works. In the Kingdom of God, Jesus is king of an upside-down kingdom in which the first will be last and the last will be first (Matthew 19:20, 20:16). Greatness in God's kingdom is not defined by power, but by service (Mark 10:42–45; John 13:1–20). In God's kingdom, people who may be marginalized elsewhere are blessed with God's favor and welcomed into a place of belonging (Matthew 5:3–11; Mark 10:13–16; Luke 7:36–50; John 4). In God's kingdom, people lose

their life to save it (Matthew 10:39, 16:25; Mark 8:35). More unusual still is the fact that, in Jesus's kingdom, the king himself does not call the people to do anything he has not already done on their behalf. Jesus, the king, gave up his privileges and status to serve people.

Christ Jesus ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:5–8)

Jesus gave up his status in order to become human and serve people. Jesus served others, washing their feet, healing their bodies, casting out demons, and giving them new life. Ultimately, he served by his sacrifice on the cross, setting humanity free from the power of sin and death and establishing a new way of life. In this new way of life, this new kind of kingdom, not only can people live under his rule of freedom, grace, and wholeness, but they can also serve like the king by extending the wisdom of his kingdom to the world, bringing hope and healing to people and communities. When followers of Jesus serve their families, neighbors, coworkers, and communities, they advance the kingdom. When followers of Christ form relationships with marginalized people and advocate for justice on their behalf, they announce the kingdom. When bosses who serve Jesus lead their employees by serving them, they bring the kingdom. When hungry people are fed in the name of Jesus, the kingdom comes. When kingdom citizens serve like Jesus served, love like Jesus loved, and give like Jesus gave, God's kingdom reigns and his will is done on Earth just as it is done in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

## On Earth as It Is in Heaven

A few years ago, the people of a church in the center of Phoenix, Arizona recognized that the neighborhood around the church had changed, and there was a need for a broken community to be healed. The people of the church wanted to live out God's wisdom and bring the kingdom to their broken neighborhood. As they observed their community, they saw that terrified refugees from war-torn countries had been resettled into the neighborhood. In the neighborhood's schools, 100% of the children qualified for free breakfast and lunch programs and often had nothing to eat over the weekends. Families were being torn apart as parents were deported and children remained behind with distant relatives. Sex trafficking and prostitution were happening on the sidewalk next to the church. A drug ring was operating out of the house three doors down from the church. People in the neighborhood were trapped in poverty without the basic reading and writing skills needed to get jobs.

People were in pain and living in despair, but God's kingdom is about healing and wholeness. So, the people in the church began building relationships with people in the neighborhood to share the love of Jesus. They partnered with the schools and started offering weekend breakfast to kids and families, sitting down together at the table and becoming friends. They opened food and clothing banks, praying with people and sharing the kingdom message of healing through Jesus at the same time they shared food and clothes. The church invited health agencies, GED programs, and early-childhood training classes to move onto the church

property so that people could receive needed services and learn skills to provide for their families. Church members invited the people of the neighborhood into the church family to meet Jesus, who is the one to bring complete healing to broken lives.

Coming to the church for a job program, a young woman named Andrea was overwhelmed by the acceptance and love offered by the people. After a year of working with the job program, she chose a life with Jesus for herself. With tears running down her face, she told a group of new friends from the church, "I didn't know people like this existed; I never knew love like this existed." Life in that church community became messy, unpredictable, and alive with the healing presence of Jesus. The kingdom had come.

The Kingdom of God is here. Jesus is near. There is still more to come, though. The Kingdom of God is both **already** and **not yet**. Life in the kingdom has been initiated but not fully realized. Ultimately, Jesus will return and complete the restoration of this world according to the wisdom of God's design. Jesus will give people new bodies; heaven and Earth will come together as a new heaven and a new Earth. The Kingdom of God will reign completely as God dwells with people and reigns with justice, grace, mercy, wisdom, and beauty. Everything will be fully made right.

## Angled Mirrors



Apart from the occasional fun house mirrors that distort images of their subjects, mirrors reflect reality. Most of the time, people look into a mirror to understand what something really looks like. When people look straight into a mirror, their own image is reflected back to them; however, when a mirror is angled, it reflects something above, below, or to the side. Followers of Christ are to be mirrors, angled in such a way that they reflect the image of God. They are to reflect the love and justice of God into the world (N.T. Wright, personal communication, 2014). If people believe that the kingdom is both already and not yet, if they believe that Jesus is setting everything right and will make everything new one day, then they will point ahead to the beauty of the new creation with art that reflects the beauty of a glorious Creator. The light of Jesus that shines through them will expose practices that strip people of value and will reflect God's love and justice in a world being set right (N.T. Wright, personal communication, 2014). They will be angled mirrors reflecting God's love, justice, and beauty to the world through their creativity and hope.

## The Mission of God



*Christ Washing the Apostles' Feet*, by Simon Bening, c. 1525-1530. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California. Photo courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Making everything right is not something that happens without intention. As discussed in Chapter 3, God was intentional about creating the world with order, and he is intentional about restoring it so that it aligns once again with the wisdom of his design. God is on mission. The **mission of God** is to restore a world broken by sin, and this mission flows out of his character. God is a self-sending God whose sacrificial love is the overarching characteristic of his mission of redemption and restoration for the world. Out of his character of love, God sends himself to the world. God's very nature is one of sending himself.

## Missio Dei

God himself is a self-sending God, a missionary God, who does not wait for people to come to him or for the world to be restored. Instead, God actively goes to the world and to individuals because that is who he is by nature. The theological point that mission is an attribute of God is called *missio Dei*. *Missio Dei*, which means "mission of God" or "sending of God," is rooted in an understanding of the essential nature of the Trinity that results in the action of mission. God sent himself to the world through Jesus Christ; God the Father and God the Son sent the Holy Spirit; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit send the church into the world, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry forth God's mission of salvation and healing to the broken world (Bosch, 1991, as cited in Laing, 2009; Bosch, 1991, as cited by Guder, 2005). The theology of *missio Dei* has implications for Christ followers and the church today. "The church exists because God has an ongoing mission to the world ... the church is privileged to serve the purposes of God" (Laing, 2009, p. 92).

God's mission is characterized by sending, and its corollary, serving. Jesus explained that he had not come to bring healing and wholeness to the world through traditional power structures, but by giving his life as a sacrifice. As king and Lord, Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve and to offer his very life for the salvation of the world (Matthew 20:28). At one point during Jesus's earthly ministry, the mother of his **disciples** James and John came to him and asked for her sons to sit at Jesus's right and left hand in his kingdom. Operating out of values of the broken world, rather than the wisdom of the kingdom, she lobbied for her sons to be placed in positions of power. The other disciples were indignant that they were left out of the power play, but Jesus stepped in and corrected them all. He said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25–28)

The night before Jesus served by sacrificing his life, he served by washing feet. In first-century Palestine, it was customary for the host of a meal to provide a servant to wash the feet of the guests. In a pedestrian society with dirt roads used by both people and animals, feet were often caked with dirt, waste, and mud, so a servant would perform the lowly task of washing the guests' feet before dinner. Once again, Jesus turned expectations upside down. When the disciples gathered in the upper room for the Last Supper, Jesus, instead of a servant, wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of each disciple. He acted as servant, taking dirty feet in his hands, washing them clean,

and showing once again that he had not come to be served, but to serve. In the simple act of washing feet, he foreshadowed the way he would cleanse them from sin by his sacrifice on the cross. When he finished washing their feet, he told the disciples that just as he had served, they should serve. The same holds true for Jesus's followers today: They are called to serve.

Through Jesus's sacrifice, he made a way for individuals to be saved from sin and death and for the whole world to be set right. Individuals are justified not only so they can experience personal salvation and eternal life, but also so they can be sent as God's agents of healing in the world by serving. Simply put, people are justified so that they can do justice (N.T. Wright, personal communication, 2014; Keller, 2010).

Injustice happens when people abuse power or place themselves at the center of the world. In a world where people focus on themselves first, their own wants, needs, and values take precedence over the value, worth, and needs of others. In God's kingdom, in which God is at the center, humility, service, and recognizing human dignity are primary values.

Injustice can result from lack—lack of humility, lack of love, lack of grace, and lack of mercy. God does not lack. God's love is so full it overflows. It spilled over into a beautiful creation. It overflowed by sending Jesus. It is poured out through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit sent to continue the mission of Jesus in the world. When God's people are filled with the overflowing love of God, recognizing that they are saved by his love and grace, they, too, become overflowing agents of God's love and do justice (Keller, 2010).

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus declared that he had come to enact justice by taking good news to the poor, liberating captives, giving sight to the blind, and setting the oppressed free (Luke 4:18–22). When crowds of people who were sick, diseased, in pain, and oppressed came to Jesus, he healed them (Matthew 4:23–25). He taught people living under the oppression of injustice that the Kingdom of God was available to them (Matthew 5:1–12). For people who thought they were outside the reach of God's kingdom because they were on the edges of society, this was good news indeed. God's kingdom was not distant; it had come near, and they were invited.

Followers of Jesus today are called to continue his mission to set the world right and establish justice. They are called to continue serving the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the widow, orphan, and alien. They are sent to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–16), carrying the message of Jesus to a hurting world, serving as Jesus served, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

## Called to Serve

A woman named Ann was gripped by God's gift of grace that had delivered her from an oppressive addiction. She, in turn, saw other oppressed people through the eyes of God's grace and knew that God was calling her to work for justice, freeing people from oppression, both in North America and around the world. She changed her career path and now leads organizations that care for immigrants and refugees and that work toward fostering peace in areas of conflict around the world. God's grace in her life helped her to see other people through the eyes of grace. Justice flowing from love and grace is a stark contrast to injustice fueled by lack, hate, and abusive power.

## God's Mission Becomes Humanity's Mission

The human heart longs for purpose, meaning, and mission. Long before *Mission: Impossible* was a movie franchise, it was a television series, first from 1966 to 1973 and again from 1988 to 1990. The idea of having a mission resonates with people at their deepest level and resurfaces in popular culture again and again. Many people would secretly love to get that mysterious summons that begins, "Your mission ..., should you choose to accept it" (Geller, 1966).

Although people normally do not get an invitation for a mission on a self-destructing device, the offer to partner with God in his mission is real and is for regular people. The night before Jesus died, he prayed for his current and future followers. As he talked with the Father, he acknowledged the sending nature of the mission that would flow from him to his followers. He said to the Father, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Jesus did not call his followers to be isolated and elitist; he sent his followers out to the world to share the message that God's kingdom had come near. They had a mission to complete. The mission of God continues as his followers do for the world what Jesus did (Wright, 1994). His followers continue to carry forward God's mission when they witness to God's love for individuals and the whole of creation and live out the reality of God's healing action of restoring brokenness within people and communities, coming together under the presence, rule, and influence of God.

God's call to ordinary people to be his witness in the world is evident throughout the Bible. The Old Testament is full of stories of people who were God's witness in the world. God consistently called ordinary people to witness to his message of healing and to show others how to know and worship him (Shenk, 2005). Then, Jesus carried on God's plan of calling ordinary people to carry God's message. The Kingdom of God would be spread by the witness of ordinary people who had chosen to be subjects of the king and live their lives according to the values of the kingdom. When Jesus met with his disciples after his resurrection, he called them to be sent to the world as he had been sent. He said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). He sent them and empowered them with the gift of the Holy Spirit. They were not sent to proclaim the kingdom out of their own strength, but through the power of the Holy Spirit. Although they did not understand at the time, when Jesus spoke with them the night before he died, Jesus told them that the Holy Spirit would enable them to be God's witnesses, giving them truth and authority from Jesus (John 16:13).

Find Your Purpose



You have purpose. You have a mission. Sometimes it may seem like you may just be spinning your wheels waiting for life to happen, but really, you have a purpose and a mission. Your contributions matter. Think about things that make you, you. What are your strengths? What are you passionate about? When do you feel fully alive? How have your life experiences shaped you and given you specific insight? When do you become so engrossed in something that you lose all track of time? When do you feel God's pleasure? How might you work wisely to restore God's original intent of order and design to the world?

The movie *Chariots of Fire* (Fayed, Puttnam, & Hudson, 1981) told the story of two Olympic Runners in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell was a Scottish runner who was also a missionary to China. While he had a mission to share the message of God as a preacher, he also knew that running was part of his mission. When his sister demeaned his running as less worthy than his missionary work, he explained to her that both pursuits were callings from God; one calling was not more worthy than the other. He said, "I believe that God made me for a purpose—for China. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt" (Fayed, Puttnam, & Hudson, 1981). God calls people to different vocations; a call from God to serve others through designing sound bridges, reflecting God's beauty through the arts, or teaching children to read is not less worthy than a call to be a pastor or missionary. God calls people to serve him and serve the world through many ways and means.

Frederick Buechner (1993), author, pastor, and theologian, said that a good way to find your purpose, to know what mission God is calling you to, is to discern the work "that you most need to do and that the world most needs to have done" (p. 118). He explained that if you enjoy your work, but it is meaningless, then you have probably not found your purpose. Conversely, if you are doing work that is meaningful for the world, but you are miserable doing it you have not found your purpose either. He sums up the idea by saying, "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, 1993, p. 119). Buechner was talking about more than mere happiness. He was talking about mission and purpose—knowing that their work meets a need and makes a contribution to the world while also bringing joy to the deep parts of their soul is where people find their calling.

Karen had a meaningful job managing a family practice physician's office. Every day she helped people receive the medical care they needed. Her colleagues at the practice found the job fulfilling and satisfying. She did not. She enjoyed her coworkers and the patients, but there was no deep gladness in her heart; she did not sense that she was doing the work she was created to do. This all changed when she completed a second degree and changed careers to be a teacher. She suddenly found a sense of deep purpose in her work. As she saw the lights come on in students' eyes when they had learned from her teaching, she knew that she was fulfilling her mission. Her deep gladness had met the world's hunger. How about you? Where is your deep gladness ready to meet the world's deep hunger?

After his resurrection, Jesus repeated the call to the disciples. He emphasized that they were called to be sent to all people in order to help people become disciples, followers of Jesus. As they were shaped by the mission, they were to carry it forward so that others could know the king who set people free and is setting the world right. Jesus said to his disciples:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19–20)

The call to go and make disciples was not restricted to the people gathered on a hillside in Galilee that day. That call is for all people, at all times and in all places, who follow Jesus. The self-sending God continues to send himself to the world through his people who come together as the church.

## Spreading the Kingdom of God

A young lady named Rebecca chose to join a ministry focused on prayer. For several months, she dedicated herself to prayer and praying for people around the world. After months of prayer, she felt a call to participate in God's mission by going to a country where the people live in poverty and have little freedom. She joined 10 other followers of Christ, and, as a team, they were sent out to join a community halfway around the world. They went to language school, learned to cook and eat the food of their new country, and made friends with their new neighbors. For part of each day, they gathered together to pray for ways to share the hope of Jesus

with people. After they had been part of their new neighborhood for a year, the teenagers in the neighborhood began asking them questions about Jesus. Some chose to become followers of Jesus. This was risky. For Rebecca and the team, the work they were doing put them at risk of being arrested, imprisoned, or deported. Local people who came to know Jesus risked arrest, imprisonment, being cut off from their families and friends, and perhaps even killed for their faith. Despite the risk, Rebecca and her team chose to hear the call to spread the healing of God's kingdom to oppressed people and put down roots in their new country in order to be faithful to the call.

Coming together as the church can be one of the biggest hurdles of the 21st century, particularly in Western cultures. While technology has enabled people worldwide to come together more easily than ever before, individualism, rather than community, is the hallmark of much of society. God's plan, demonstrated throughout the New Testament, was that followers would come together in communities to worship, to pray, to share in the Lord's table, and to care for one another (Acts 2:42) in order to be formed into the likeness of Christ and be his ambassadors to a hurting world (2 Corinthians 5:18–21).

## Church and Community

Brian was a teacher and a coach in an urban middle school. He recognized that his students lacked healthy role models and that their families not only lacked resources, but also hope. He was not content with the status quo. Although he already had a master's degree in education, he earned a second master's degree in urban youth ministry so that he would have more tools and resources to communicate effectively with his students. He gathered adults from his church to hold sports tournaments with the kids on Saturdays so that the kids would spend time hanging out with healthy role models. As the kids began to see that these adults enjoyed spending time with them, the kids began asking them questions about life and family, sex, and money, and sometimes about Jesus. After a few months, the principal of this public school noticed such a dramatic difference in the demeanor of the students that she invited the people from Brian's church to be on campus any time before or after school, at lunch, and during sports practices. As people gathered around the mission to serve and share the hope of Jesus, the kingdom came and changed that place of despair into a place of light.

## Becoming a Disciple

The invitation to become a disciple of Jesus is an open invitation. God's work to free people from sin and bring wholeness to their lives is not just part of a theological story; it is an actual offer for people to accept Jesus's sacrifice as the payment for their sin, and then grow in relationship with Jesus, becoming more and more like him, adopting his wisdom and living as citizens of his kingdom. The offer is free. There are no exclusions—it is open to all. Becoming a follower of Christ is not something that is earned, but an invitation that is accepted. Jesus offers forgiveness and freedom from sin and brokenness as a free gift of grace. The gift is accepted by people through faith. Chapter 6 discussed the topic of faith as an orientation of the human heart that motivates people to act on what they know and affirm. Coming to faith in Jesus is not something that is done blindly or without thought. People are not Christians

because they live in a particular place, or because their parents are Christians, or even because they go to church. Becoming a Christian, a follower of Christ, is a decision and an action to change the orientation of the heart. As people come to know, understand, and believe Jesus's offer of salvation, they can decide to accept Jesus's gift and receive forgiveness for sin, then grow in relationship with him. To begin a relationship with Jesus, a person simply needs to say he or she accepts Jesus's offer, receive his forgiveness for sin, and be ready to begin a new relationship with him. Being a follower of Christ is not about assenting to a list of propositions; it is about a living relationship with the King of the kingdom.

Deciding to accept Jesus's free gift of salvation is the first step to becoming a follower of Jesus and living in a vibrant relationship with him. After taking that step, one begins the process of growing to be more and more like Jesus, reflecting Jesus's love, justice, grace, beauty, and wisdom to the world. This process of growing is often called spiritual formation or discipleship. The ongoing process of discipleship will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 11. To start growing in the discipleship process, a follower of Christ begins by orienting his or her heart and mind toward being a disciple.

In Jesus's day, when a **rabbi** invited someone to be his disciple, that person listened and learned from the rabbi's teaching, which was known as sitting at the rabbi's feet. The disciple followed the rabbi everywhere and modeled his life after the rabbi's. Wherever the rabbi went and whatever the rabbi did, his disciple went and learned to do. Eventually, the disciple became just like the rabbi. When Jesus gave his followers the mission of going to spread the good news of the kingdom, he told them to make disciples and teach those disciples to do everything Jesus had taught them (Matthew 28:19–20). His instruction did not say to just go and tell people about Jesus, but to help them actually become disciples so that they would be able to do everything Jesus taught (Willard, 2014). There is a difference between being a Christian in name and being a Christian in practice. Following Jesus and learning to do everything he said means becoming a disciple.

Being a disciple has been compared to being an apprentice or a student of Jesus (Willard, 1998). In the trades, an apprentice commits to being with and learning from someone who has mastered a craft in order to be able to do become as skilled at the craft as the master craftsman. When people choose to become apprentices, or disciples, of Jesus, they choose to be with him, "by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God" (Willard, 1998, p. 283). The choice to be a disciple is a choice that impacts all facets of life because living in the kingdom is a way of living that encompasses all of who a person is and everything a person does. Being a disciple is not something that is only done on Sundays at church, but every day, hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute as an integrated way of life. Becoming a disciple means to learn to increasingly "live like Jesus lived, love like Jesus loved, to leave behind what Jesus left behind" (Stetzer & Putman, 2006, p. 76). Being a disciple involves choice, commitment, and intentionality. Living like Jesus does not generally happen immediately; it is usually a process of growing, learning, and becoming.

## What's in a Name?

The terms *nominal Christian* or *Sunday Christian*, refer to someone who self-identifies as Christian, but is Christian in name only; the person's actual beliefs, actions, and orientation of the heart do not flow from a relationship with Jesus. Sunday Christians may go to church and say and do one thing at church, but their

actions the rest of the week do not match their Sunday persona.

Jesus used a Greek term to describe the religious leaders of his day who were focused more on their outward religiosity than on how their heart was oriented toward God. The term Jesus used is still in use today: hypocrite. In Jesus's day, it was a Greek theater term describing actors who wore masks to cover their real identity in order to portray a character. They were pretenders. When Jesus called the religious leaders hypocrites in Matthew 23, it was not a compliment about their acting skills, but an observation that they were only playing a religious part. He challenged them to drop the charade and orient their hearts toward God. He called them, and still calls people today, out of play-acting and into a dynamic, life-changing, all-encompassing, relationship with him.

The original 12 disciples were often surprised, and sometimes even shocked, by the way Jesus lived and who Jesus embraced. In Jesus's culture, eating with someone was a way of forming friendships and bonds of mutual hospitality. The religious people in the culture were very selective about their guest lists and would not invite people who were considered unclean or less than worthy to eat with them. Scandalously, Jesus shared meals with people who were considered the outcasts of society. He pejoratively became known as one who ate with "tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:15–17; Luke 15:1). While the religious folks would not invite these outcasts into their homes for fear that their sin was contagious, Jesus turned everything upside down and showed that it was not their sin, but his holiness that was contagious (Blomberg, 2005). People who ate with Jesus and spent time with him became more like him. Zacchaeus, a tax collector, shared hospitality with Jesus and changed everything. Tax collectors were Jews employed by Rome to collect taxes from their fellow Jews. They were considered traitors because they worked for the enemy. They were also considered cheats. Rome demanded that they collect a certain amount in taxes from the people. The tax collectors in turn, would collect higher amounts of money from the people and pocket the difference. They often became wealthy by fleecing the people this way. When Jesus went to Zacchaeus's house as a guest, his love, justice, and joy rubbed off. The man who had collected money for himself turned around and gave it away. He gave freely to the poor and repaid the people he had defrauded, adding interest voluntarily to what he paid back (Luke 19:1–10).

Being a disciple of Jesus is costly; it requires that people give up being the king of their own kingdom. This means choosing to do things Jesus's way, in Jesus's time, and with Jesus's priorities. It means choosing humility over pride, sacrifice over greed, and wisdom over foolishness. It may require taking uncomfortable risks and living in ways that seem new and strange, but it is also full of joy. As people grow to become more and more like Jesus, their joy grows because they become increasingly free. They become progressively free from the trappings of sin, from worry, from the need to be right, from the need to possess, from the need for power, and from habits that can bind people to destructive patterns. Jesus modeled what a life of freedom could mean.

Jesus was free to serve the least of these because he was not seeking status. Jesus was free to teach the law of love because he was not bound to the law of sin and death. Jesus was free to challenge the establishment because he did not seek his own self-preservation but would lay down his life for his friends (Fitch & Holsclaw, 2013, p. 35).

Living in the kingdom is a life characterized by freedom. Growing as a disciple is an intentional process that leads to freedom, joy, love, grace, and beauty.

## The Cost of Discipleship

In 1945, 2 weeks before the Allies liberated the Flossenburg Concentration Camp where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was being held and 3 weeks before Hitler committed suicide, the Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer for his work with the German resistance plots to assassinate Hitler and end the war (Metaxas, 2010). Bonhoeffer, a theologian and pastor, directed an illegal Church Training College until it was closed by the Gestapo. In 1939, American friends got him out of Germany, but he chose to return saying, "I shall have no right ... to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people" (Leibholz, 1937/1995, pp. 18–19). During the war, he pastored and worked for the political underground. He called followers of Christ to focus on Christ and called the church to step away from complicity to the Nazi regime by remaining silent.

Long before he was martyred, Bonhoeffer had written about the call to share in Christ's suffering and recognize the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer (1937/1995) wrote about the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. Cheap grace is an intellectual idea of God's grace that demands nothing of people who follow Christ. Costly grace, on the other hand, recognizes the price that Jesus paid through his death and that the actual call Jesus makes to his followers is, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Following Jesus, being a disciple, is not something done solely by intellectual assent, but by obedience to Jesus. Being a disciple is not something lived out once a week at church or only when someone feels like being a disciple. Discipleship is the process of learning to be obedient to Jesus at all times in all situations, heeding Jesus's call to put aside one's agenda in order to follow Jesus's agenda every day. It is the process of dying to self in order to be filled with the abundant life of Jesus. When Bonhoeffer (1937/1995) penned the words, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" (p. 89), he did not know that, in his case, it would mean a physical martyrdom. Because he had made the decision to follow Jesus day-by-day, no matter the risk and no matter the cost, he was able to be obedient even when that obedience cost him everything.

## Conclusion

God's Story in human history began with the creation of the world that was full of love, justice, beauty, and order. The fall happened and the beautiful world became marred with sin. God gave himself to the world through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to bring redemption and overturn the curse of sin. Jesus overcame sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection and now is reaching the world through the power of the Holy Spirit, filling the lives of people who share the message of God's kingdom and the hope of Jesus with a broken world. Jesus is setting everything right and restoring God's creation according to the wisdom of his original design.

Today, Jesus's followers share his mission to take the kingdom of justice and love to places of darkness and despair, to transform the values of the broken world by the practical wisdom revealed in God's design for his creation. Eventually, Jesus will return and fully restore the world in a new heaven and Earth, and people will have new bodies in the world once again characterized by the wisdom of God. Living in the kingdom that is already and not yet, in which people live between the past perfection of the creation and the coming perfection of the new heavens and new Earth, people have the opportunity to become disciples, take on God's mission, and spread hope and healing to the world.

## Chapter Review

### Main Ideas

- The Story, or metanarrative, of God in human history is a continuing Story, and people still have a place in the Story. Since Jesus's death and resurrection, the Story has turned to the fourth act, restoration. Jesus continues restoring broken lives, bringing healing and wholeness to individuals and communities.
- God's kingdom is here. To live in the Kingdom of God means to live under the presence, rule, and influence of God, living with love, justice, grace, wisdom, and beauty in a way that connects people with Jesus. The Holy Spirit empowers followers of Christ to live wisely in the Kingdom of God.
- God is a missional God, who sends himself to people to provide redemption and restoration. God sent Jesus to become human and offer his life as a sacrifice for sin. God the Father and God the Son sent the Holy Spirit to empower followers of Jesus so that they are able to spread God's love and healing to a broken world. In this way, God's mission becomes the mission of his followers.
- To become a disciple, individuals must decide to accept Jesus's free offer of forgiveness and salvation, then commit to following Jesus wholeheartedly, learning to become more and more like him.
- Not only are people called to the mission of sharing the message of Jesus, but they are also called to help people learn to do everything Jesus said. When people choose to learn to do everything Jesus did, they become disciples, or apprentices of Jesus, continually learning, growing, and changing to become more like Christ.

### Key Terms

- **Already And Not Yet:** While God's reign is already in effect over all creation, there is also more to come. The full effects of God's kingdom will be seen at the return of Jesus the king, when all is restored in the new heavens and the new Earth, and the work of God is completed. In this sense, the kingdom is not yet fully realized.
- **Disciple:** In the context of Christianity, a disciple is a person who chooses to follow, learn from, and take on the character, commitments, and qualities of Jesus.
- **Kingdom of God:** The reign and rule of God over his creation as he dwells with people, redeeming them and restoring creation to his wise way of order and design; (New Testament emphasis) God's redemptive reign over his people centering on Jesus Christ, the King of God's kingdom, and God's continual presence among his people through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament, while the kingdom has concrete social and political dimensions, it chiefly refers to God's governance of the human heart.

- **Metanarrative:** The overarching story and theme of God's redemptive work in history that is carried throughout all the stories within the Bible.
- **Mission of God:** God the Father sent the Son; the Father and Son send the Spirit; and the Father, Son, and Spirit send the church to the world to bring healing and restoration to individuals, communities, and the world through the gracious rule of God who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for others (Matthew 20:28).
- **Rabbi:** A Jewish religious leader and teacher.
- **Restoration:** When people have been freed from sin to new life, Jesus continues to work in their lives, healing the scars of sin and brokenness and making them new. They become restored to wholeness, and their lives become marked by grace and love. God is not only restoring individuals, but all of creation, fixing brokenness in the world. This process will continue until the eventual restoration of all things, when everything is made new—new heavens, new Earth, and new bodies for people.

## Application of Knowledge

- All people are invited to experience redemption and restoration through a relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Individuals and communities of Christ-followers are called to participate in God's mission to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world.
- Followers of Christ are called to be more than Christian in name only; they are called to be disciples.

## Questions for Reflection

- What are some ways that the Kingdom of God differs from popular misconceptions of the term? What are some defining characteristics of the Kingdom of God? How might you advance the kingdom by spreading these characteristics in your day-to-day life?
- How are you loving by serving others? How are you loving by worshiping God? How are you doing justice? How are you creating beauty?
- How might you join in God's mission to bring justice and healing to a broken world? What might that look like in your own family, neighborhood, or work place? What might it look like for your church community to do that together?
- How does your purpose fit within God's purpose?
- What might you need to leave behind to be a disciple of Jesus? What might you need to embrace fully to be a disciple of Jesus?

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GLOSSARY

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES