

We are back in the diner with Joe. He's looking relaxed. I wonder what's up?

\* \* \* \* \*

Good morning, Joe. You're looking pretty relaxed. How's life?

*Much the same, as always. I guess I am feeling more relaxed around you. How is James doing? You know, with your book and all?*

Writing is a struggle for me. I'm like everyone else. I want people to like what I write. But I also want them to understand ideas that I think are important for our world. It all seems so difficult because I am more interested in the ideas than the words, but I need to use words to communicate. I'm saying too much about this. What did you think of Chapter Three?

*It was long and kind of difficult. I thought you were going to keep it simple. I liked the first part, but didn't get much of the second. I still don't know why it was important. The last part about old people and their money was awesome. It was begging to be said, but I am amazed you said it.*

Let's take it in stages. What did you like about the first part?

*I guess I liked it because I recognized it from the way you tell God's story. I think I am starting to understand more about what you call a missional focus for life.*

Good. So the second part was in answer to your question about who changed the story. People tried to change it before Augustine, but didn't have much success. Augustine succeeded in changing the focus in some dramatic ways. Most people who don't recognize the story that I'm telling have an Augustinian hangover!

*That's a funny way to think about it. I still don't understand how their... what did you call it?*

An Augustinian hangover.

*Okay, what you said. I still don't know why people with this hangover don't tell the story the way you do. It's in the Bible, right? How does this hangover change things for old people?*

Well, it's not just for old people! Under Augustine's influence, both young and old believers were taught to think more about Jesus saving us from Hell and less about Jesus as our teacher who shows us how to live out God's mission of loving the world.

*James, are you saying Jesus doesn't save people from Hell?*

Of course not. I believe the Bible teaches that Jesus is the only one who can save us from Hell. I am trying to help people understand that being saved *from* Hell is only the beginning of the Christian life. We have also been saved *for* many good things. Here is how the Apostle Paul put it:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10, ESV, italics added)

*I can't believe you just quoted the Bible at me!*

Sorry, but sometimes I do that. Joe, I want you to understand this is not just my opinion. This was mainstream teaching in the first three centuries of the church. It's all over the pages of the New Testament. And it is so frequent in the next level of tradition that it makes us squirm.

*What's a level of tradition? What are you talking about?*

Hmmm. Let me give you a short tour of early Christian writings?

*Seriously? Please don't make this too long!*

Jesus and his apostles believed that the writings of the Old Testament told God's story. The Apostles believed that Jesus' teaching and example expressed the very heart of God's story. The death and resurrection of Jesus took place about the year 30 AD. The writings found in the New Testament were written between about 44-95. John, the last apostle may have lived until about 96 AD. The early church came to believe that the writings in our New Testament are also authoritative and useful for teaching God's story and the Christian life. The Old and New Testament were put together and called "The Book," or Bible. Think about the Bible as the first floor of a library building?

*One book makes a library?*

Well, there are 39 smaller books in the Old Testament, and 27 books and letters in the New Testament. Think about this as the first Christian library?

*Okay, but this isn't very interesting. I haven't spent much time in libraries since they let me out of high school. I would much rather surf the Internet.*

Suddenly I feel very old! I agree this can be dull, but if you want to understand God's story, and if you want to understand how and when the story changed, then you can't skip the history of how ideas developed. The church preserved a second layer of writings known to us as "The Apostolic Fathers." Some of these authors knew the apostles or served in their same churches. Some of these writings were actually kept with the writings in the New Testament through the fourth century. These "Apostolic Fathers" wrote between about 80-170 AD. Think of their writings as the second floor of our library. A third floor in the library is populated by the writings of a group of heavy-duty thinkers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen. They wrote from about 140-250.

*Please tell me there won't be a test after this. Should I be taking notes?*

I promise to skip the test. A fourth level begins after 312 and stretches until the death of Gregory the Great in 604. As you might imagine, this fourth floor is complicated with lots of interesting personalities and tragic events—like the destruction of Rome in 410.

*Hey, you skipped a section between 250 and 312. What was happening then?*

You are listening! By 250, Christians had become enough of a force in the Roman Empire that a series of emperors tried to discourage and even exterminate them. Imperial agents tore down Christian buildings. They tried to burn every Christian writing. They persecuted the leaders and many church leaders were fed to wild animals in the arena, burned at the stake, or tortured to death because they wouldn't worship the gods of Rome. Just imagine that the space between the third and fourth floors is filled with people running for their lives from Imperial troops.

*Ha! You make it sound like "The Empire Strikes Back." What happened in 312?*

Long story made short? The Emperor Constantine became a Christian and stopped the persecutions. He wanted to use Christianity to unify his empire.

*Okay. Come back to the point. What good is this library today?*

Preachers today almost always stick to the first floor. But through the centuries, teachers and preachers have come up with all kinds of ideas. Some of these ideas seem good, but soon lead to conflicts with other Christians and other Christian communities. Eventually someone asks, "Who decides what is right?"

The Christian community experimented with several different answers to this question. We tried church councils and consulted popes. But there hasn't been much of a consensus.

Beginning in 1517, Martin Luther reminded us that the writings on the first floor provide the logic for everything above them. If our opinions and practices don't fit with first floor ideas and practices, then they probably aren't worth defending. As scholars and teachers argue about complex issues today, we look back to the first floor for our foundation. We search the second through fourth floors and see if we can find allies for our opinions. If we can't find anyone else anticipating our questions and answers, then our opinions probably aren't worth much and our practice may be pretty risky. All of this is complicated by the fact that teachers and scholars pick and choose whose opinions they value. We get defensive and sometimes aggressive when people challenge our ideas. We need humility!

*Okay. I think I get the drift of what you're saying. If you can't show someone earlier saying something like what you are saying, then you're probably wrong.*

Good—you get the main idea. It is a little more complicated because sometimes no one gives the same answer, but points to the same problem you are trying to solve. This is what I mean when I say our opinions and practices need to fit with first floor ideas and practices. See if this works for you: Think of a 3-D jigsaw puzzle. We look at what is in the first floor, and we see some holes or even some possible conflicts because some of the pieces are either missing or obscure. Later teachers and scholars sometimes try to shape pieces to fit with this 3-D puzzle. This can be risky, and we need humility to hold our opinions loosely.

*3-D puzzles? Call them holograms and you can join the 21<sup>st</sup> century! Okay, come back to where we started before this whole library thing. Why did you say the second floor stuff makes people nervous?*

Early Christians were really serious about walking their talk. Sometimes it almost sounds like they thought they were earning their relationship with God instead of expressing or showing the relationship they already had. They were very focused on doing good works—works of love and mercy.

*It is about time people tried to walk their talk! Why are you so nervous about good works?*

Truly good works—works of love and mercy—express the very the heart of missional living. Works that make us look good—offered as a bribe to God—are an expression of mistrust and fear. Works that make us look good—performed before others in order to impress them with our goodness—are expressions of bloated egos. Here's the problem: We generally suck at interpreting motives, and so Christian teachers get nervous when we talk about them. It is a sad state of affairs.

*Come back to the second floor thing. How were these guys walking their talk?*

Because God loves us and gave himself for us, we are called to love God, to love one another, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is foundational, first floor stuff. Christian writings on the second floor are thick with this stuff, but they add a sort of twist to it. Loving their neighbor, even if it means their death, is the way they "imitate God." One early leader, in chains and on his way to be executed in Rome, began seven of his letters like this: "Ignatius the Image-Bearer to the church at..." He believed he was showing God's image to the world through his love and gentleness in the service of others. He believed gentleness was the way any wicked forces in this world would be overcome.

*"Image-Bearer?" Help me with that?*

Ignatius was consciously trying to show the world what God was like. Remember the commission in the Garden? And then Jesus came and showed us exactly what God is like. Ignatius took all of this seriously and tried to act it out. In our culture, people have made fun of the question, "What would Jesus do?" But Christians were very serious about this question in Ignatius' day. They wanted to imitate Jesus because that is what disciples did. We follow Jesus so that we can learn to be like him and continue his teaching.

*James, I'm almost afraid to say this. I don't want to offend you, but I can't stand it any longer. Maybe Jesus is okay... he sounds okay. But when I talk to my friends, no one thinks God is gentle. Some of them claim he is more bloodthirsty than a vampire. I can't believe that God is good. God is like the biggest egotist in the world. I hear all this talk about wanting to be like God and I hope you fail. You're a nice guy! We don't need more narcissists running around asking the world to worship them.*

Joe! Thank you for trusting me. I am not offended. If God is bloodthirsty, or if God really is a narcissist, then I don't want to be like him at all. Does Jesus sound like a narcissist to you?

*I hear some pretty weird claims about Jesus, too. I guess I am not sure what to believe. Most of the time it sounds like he is okay. But sometimes I hear really narrow-minded stuff, you know, about Jesus being the only possible way to God. That sounds narcissistic to me. What do you think? Is Jesus a narcissist?*

Joe, I love it that you are not afraid to ask these questions. I want to help you find answers you can trust. Can I ask you to read another chapter of my book? It gets at some of your questions, and will encourage you to ask them in a larger context. I'll buy breakfast again, and then we can talk about it?

*Is it going to be as boring as the last chapter?*

Probably. But I promise I will make it worth your while.

\* \* \* \* \*

pre-quel [**pree**-kwuh l] **noun**: a literary, dramatic, or filmic work that prefigures a later work, as by portraying the same characters at a younger age. (dictionary.com<sup>1</sup>)

## Chapter Four: God in Community and on a Mission

Prequels are odd things. Sometimes, we can't see them coming. And we can argue forever about whether they are accurate and helpful. Think about "Star Wars: The Prequel Trilogy" (Episodes I - III).<sup>2</sup> Or maybe think about "Wicked" as a prequel to "The Wizard of Oz."<sup>3</sup> And imagine how the movie version of "The Hobbit" (2012) seems like a prequel to the "Lord of the Rings Trilogy" (2001-2003) to many viewers.

Can we tell a prequel to God's grand story as found in the Bible? I believe so. There may be two prequels, and I think we can partially tease them out of the Bible itself. Chapter four presents the first prequel — the story of God in community and on a mission.<sup>4</sup> The common theological title for "God in community" is "Trinity." The last part of chapter four develops God's mission in terms of God's hospitality. Chapter five questions a much more tentative prequel about the origin of evil.

Developing a prequel to God's grand story as found in the Bible faces an immediate paradox: Can we talk meaningfully about events before the creation of time as we know it?<sup>5</sup> A second question follows if we think such speech is meaningful: How can we talk about things that occur before Genesis 1?

Christian scholars deal with the paradox by recognizing two kinds of order or sequence. We normally speak about the chronological order of things as we describe the sequence of events within the flow of *our* time. We can also speak

---

<sup>1</sup> prequel. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prequel> (accessed: December 05, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Star Wars: The Prequel Trilogy (Episodes I - III) [Blu-ray], (September 16, 2011), Twentieth Century Fox. Google or Bing "Star Wars, episodes I-III" and witness the mayhem!

<sup>3</sup> *Wicked: The Untold Story of the Witches of Oz*, with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz. It has been playing on Broadway since 2003. The musical is based on Gregory Maguire's *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity on John's Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, 24 (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos/InterVarsity Press, 2008), for an initial and significant discussion of this claim. Begin with "... Jesus is telling God's story" (47) and move through to their brilliant chapter on Trinitarian mission theology (149-164).

<sup>5</sup> Christian scholars are rethinking the philosophy of time. See Gregory E. Ganssle, editor, *God and Time: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). The third contributor to this volume, William Lane Craig, offers a more thorough discussion in *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001).

about a logical order of things before creation.<sup>6</sup> We do not believe these things can be sequenced in terms of *our* time, for time as we know it appears to have come into existence with God's act of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... There was evening and there was morning—the first day."<sup>7</sup> Admitting that some philosophers may find this question puzzling, "What was God doing before this beginning?"

#### Developing a Prequel with the Apostle John

We must be cautious here and stay very close to what the Bible says, or we risk losing ourselves in fantasy and speculation.<sup>8</sup> We can only know what God was doing before the opening of Genesis if God tells us about it. The Apostle John, one of Jesus' earliest and most trusted disciples, provides us with a very good starting place in his Gospel, his letters, and in his Revelation.<sup>9</sup> Here is how his Gospel begins:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." (John 1:1-3)

The Apostle John tells us that God—the one we will learn to call Father—has never been alone. His Word was already with him in the beginning. All things were made by his Word. John clarified the identity of this Word: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) The Word who was with God and who actually is God, became flesh and lived among us. We know him as Jesus. He is the one and only Son of God who came from the Father. The last verse in John's introduction contains two hugely important claims: "No one has ever seen God,<sup>10</sup> but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest

---

<sup>6</sup> My statements are meant to fit with the more traditional view of God outside of our time. It also accords with William Lane Craig's view of God's timeless eternity before creation, and God's omnitemporality since creation. See chapter six of Craig's *Time and Eternity*, and especially page 241.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:1, 5. The Apostle Paul spoke about God's acts *before* the beginning of time in I Corinthians 2:7, II Timothy 1:9-10, and Titus 1:2-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity on John's Gospel*, 169-173, for a discussion of Karl Barth's belief that a pretemporal *pactum salutis* is mythology. No doubt Barth would be even less pleased with my attempt to sketch a prequel. Christ have mercy!

<sup>9</sup> In agreement with D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 701-707, I find no substantial reason to doubt the common authorship of the Gospel of John, his three letters, and the Revelation of John.

<sup>10</sup> John was well aware of the many reports in the Old Testament in which people encountered God and even saw God's face. So what is he saying? Although Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Isaiah had seen something of God, none of them knew God as Father the way Jesus did. See Genesis 18; 32:30; Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:5-8; Deuteronomy 24:10, and John 6:46. This list could be expanded with Isaiah 6:1-5 and many other texts. The Apostle John's statement was especially powerful in the late first century. He wrote his gospel after the fall of Jerusalem and after the destruction of the second temple in 70 AD, and his gospel portrays the profoundly strained relationships between "the Jews" and a growing Christian community.

relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18, and see 17:26). Four big ideas summarize what Jesus makes known about his Father.

*Jesus made it known that God was his Father.*<sup>11</sup> He was sent by and came from his Father.<sup>12</sup> He was returning to his Father.<sup>13</sup> Not surprisingly, the claim that God was *his* Father brought him into profound conflict with the religious authorities of his day. They claimed that God was their Father, and denied that Jesus came from the Father (John 8:41). They accused him of claiming to be equal with God and tried to kill him.<sup>14</sup>

*Jesus claimed that he was the only way to the Father* (John 14:6). He identified the temple in Jerusalem as his Father's house (John 2:16). But he also identified himself as the true temple (John 2:19-22). John's Gospel emphasized that Jesus is greater than Abraham, Jacob, and Moses.<sup>15</sup> Jesus is greater than these because those who know Jesus *also know and see his Father* (John 14:7).<sup>16</sup> John 14:10-11 helps us feel the force of this:

Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

*Jesus shared his Father's hospitality with all who would receive it.*<sup>17</sup> Returning to the opening of John's Gospel, we read that Jesus has life in himself. This life was the light of *all* humankind (John 1:4, 9; 12:32-36).<sup>18</sup> If providing light in the darkness is

---

<sup>11</sup> See Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity on John's Gospel*, 111-33, for a significant discussion of this claim.

<sup>12</sup> John 1:10-11, 14; 3:13, 17, 19, 31-36; 5:30, 36-46; 6:29-59, 62; 7:16, 28-29, 33; 8:14-18, 23, 26-30, 38, 42, 58; 10:36; 12:44-50; 16:27-28; 17:3, 8, 18, 23; 20:21.

<sup>13</sup> John 13:1; 14:1-3, 28; 16:10, 28; 17:11; 20:17.

<sup>14</sup> John 5:18; 8:58-59; 10:30-39. Two long passages show the intensity of this conflict as Jesus called the Jewish leaders to recognize God as his Father (John 5:16-47, 8:16-59). He offered them no middle ground: They could believe him, and receive eternal life, or reject him, stay in darkness, and remain condemned (John 3:16-18).

<sup>15</sup> It is significant that Abraham (8:52-58), Jacob (4:12-13), Moses (5:39-47), and even Isaiah (12:41) are called as witnesses to Jesus' ability to show the world what God was like. Like John the Baptist (John 3:30), their reputations must decrease and Jesus' reputation must increase.

<sup>16</sup> This is but one of such statements: To receive Jesus, is to receive his Father (John 13:20). To know Jesus, is to know this Father (John 1:18; 8:19). To believe in Jesus, is to believe his Father (John 12:44). In honoring Jesus, one honors his Father (John 5:22-23; 12:26-28). All of this helps us begin to understand John 10:30: "I and the Father are one" (and see John 17:11, 22).

<sup>17</sup> Until very recently, the practice of ancient hospitality has been a much neglected theme in the academic study and teaching of the Gospel of John. A good beginning at recognizing its importance comes with a close reading of Tatiana Cantarella, *Hospitality Language in the Gospel of John and its Implications for Christian Community*. A Master's Thesis submitted to the faculty of Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri, May 2, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Revelation 21:23 and 22:5 tell us this holds true for all eternity future.



one of the most basic acts of hospitality, then sharing one's very life with others takes hospitality to a very deep level. Jesus offered those who trusted him the real life that he shared with his Father (John 1:12; 5:26; 14:23; 20:31). I will develop God's hospitality in John's Gospel in greater detail in the last part of the present chapter.

*Jesus made it known that his Father would send the Holy Spirit into his followers after he returned to his Father.*<sup>19</sup> Sent by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit will be with and finally in Jesus' followers (John 7:39; 14:17). He will flow through Jesus' disciples as a river of living water (John 7:38). Named as an advocate or counselor who is called alongside to help, he will teach and remind Jesus' followers about everything Jesus had said (John 14:26) and about things to come (John 16:13). He will teach them all truth about Jesus and bring glory to Jesus and his Father (John 16:13-15).

The Holy Spirit will function like a prosecuting attorney for those in the world (John 16:8). He will prove that everyone who has not trusted Jesus remains in sin (John 16:9). He will prove that they lack any righteousness because they are not related to Jesus—the one who has returned to his Father (John 16:10). And he will prove they already stand under condemnation, because the evil one they have trusted has already been condemned (John 16:11). The Holy Spirit brings much of this conviction through the preaching and humble service of Jesus' followers (John 16:7). One should not hear this ministry in exclusively negative terms: The Spirit's conviction serves an invitation to receive Jesus, to believe in his name and works, to come into the light, to experience the forgiveness of sin, and to enjoy his Father's hospitality (John 12:44-46).

It is easy to get lost in John's Gospel and misunderstand the relationships between the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit:

- Jesus comes from and is sent by the Father (John 1:14). The Holy Spirit comes from the Father (John 15:26) and is sent by the Father and by the Son (John 16:7).
- Jesus shows us the Father and makes him known (John 1:18). Jesus teaches us about the Holy Spirit (John 14-16). The Holy Spirit teaches about Jesus and makes him and his Father known (John 16:14-15).
- The Spirit (John 16:14) and the Father (John 17:1, 5, 24) glorify the Son. The Son and the Spirit glorify the Father (John 16:14-15; 17:1).
- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be in Jesus' disciples as they love God and keep God's commandments (John 14:17, 23-24).

---

<sup>19</sup> John's Gospel tells us more about the Holy Spirit than any other book in the Bible. See Köstenberger and Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity on John's Gospel*, 93-103, and 135-48 for an initial discussion of the many passages teaching about the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John.

One contrast between Jesus and the Spirit intensifies our curiosity about who the Holy Spirit is. Jesus' earthly ministry was highly localized. The Holy Spirit's ministry will be universal as the followers of Jesus move across and around the world. Who could accomplish this, except God? With this question, we begin to understand that Jesus has made the Father known (John 1:18) as the one from whom the Spirit comes (John 15:26).<sup>20</sup> The Spirit gives life (John 6:63). With the Father, the Son sends the Spirit (John 16:7). The Son receives all things from the Father and the Spirit makes all of this known to Jesus' disciples (John 16:14-15). And with these statements, the Son makes the Spirit known as God.<sup>21</sup>

Our knowledge of God—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is meant to be very relational and experiential. It comes with this promise from Jesus: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). Hear this in terms of experiencing hospitality: God our Father and gracious host loves us enough to live with us. God the Son makes his home with us, feeds us as the bread of life, and serves us as he washes our feet, shows us his Father, dies to take away the sins of the world and by this makes sharing life with his Father possible. God the Spirit is the living water that wells up within us, teaches us all we need to know, and flows through us as we serve and forgive others. God is in community *within us*. Even as his Father sent Jesus into this world, we are also sent into this world with the mission of extending our Father's hospitality and love in all creation (John 17:18; 20:21-23; 21:15-17).

As we begin to see these relationships in John's Gospel, is it fair to ask if Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been in loving community before the creation of this world? I believe the question is fair and that the answer must be “yes.” We get a good glimpse of this in John 17:24 when Jesus said “you loved me before the creation of the world.” John's first letter gives us a second reason when he insisted, “*God is love*” (I John 4:8, 16, italic emphasis added). John defined the kind of love that God is: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (I John 3:16).<sup>22</sup> Love isn't something that God merely does. *God is love*—the kind of love that gives itself to and for others. Within their creation, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reveal themselves in their mission of self-giving love.<sup>23</sup> God is self-giving love, and

---

<sup>20</sup> The Holy Spirit is not one of the things made by the Son (John 1:3).

<sup>21</sup> What begins as an experience and intuition — the Holy Spirit within us must also be God— is clarified in other passages in the New Testament. Baptism was performed in the single name of God (Matthew 28:19). Peter identifies the Holy Spirit as God in Acts 5:3-5. Etc. ...

<sup>22</sup> This echoes what John heard Jesus say, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13).

<sup>23</sup> Köstenberger and Swain emphasize the centrality of this claim: “The study of the portrayal of the Father, Son and the Spirit in John's Gospel has demonstrated that the three persons of the Godhead are involved on one great mission, the revelation of God to humanity and the redemption of humanity for God. Not only are the three persons of the Godhead united in this mission, the presentation of the Father, Son and Spirit in John's Gospel (John's Trinitarian theology) is clearly

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have given themselves to each other and have remained in this loving community since before the creation of the world.<sup>24</sup>

#### A Sketch of the Prequel

John's writings have allowed us to begin talking about a prequel to God's grand story. A close reading of all of Scripture allows us to recognize this minimal sketch as a prequel to God's grand story. Once again, the reader is cautioned to remember this sketch is not chronologically sequenced.

God existed before the creation of the cosmos and before the beginning of time as we know it in the loving and self-giving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In God's wisdom, God destined humans (in Christ) to glory before time began (I Corinthians 2:7). God promised that humans (in Christ) would receive eternal life before time began (Titus 1:2-3).

Forseeing the fall of humanity into sin, God planned to save humanity through the death of Jesus on a Roman cross (Isaiah 46:10; Acts 2:23, Ephesians 1:11, and Revelation 13:8). The Son of God chose and was chosen for this before the beginning of the world (John 5:26; 10:18; I Peter 1:20).

God chose humans *in Christ* to be holy and blameless in God's sight (Ephesians 1:4; II Timothy 1:9-10, italic emphasis added). God predestined humans in Christ for adoption as children through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:5; Romans 8:29).

Humans in Christ are chosen to receive an inheritance (Ephesians 1:11; Romans 8:29) and are predestined to be for the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1:11-12).

God's purpose is to show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in God's kindness to humanity in Christ Jesus (John 17:24-26; Ephesians 2:7; Revelation 21-22).

---

missiologically constrained. Rather than being one of several aspects or implications of John's Trinitarian theology, mission was shown to be the nexus and focal point of John's presentation of the Father, Son and Spirit, individually and in relation to one another." See *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity on John's Gospel*, 155-56.

<sup>24</sup> This is not a full presentation of the traditional doctrine of God. One can get a fuller account of what Christian scholars call the Trinity in Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). One can add to his description—especially in his chapter one—the profound analysis of Catherine Mowbray LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), and see especially pages 244-46. Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), shows us how difficult such presentations have become.

All of this happens in accordance with God's pleasure and will—to the praise of God's glorious grace, which God has freely given humans in the One he loves (Ephesians 1:5-6).

This minimal sketch serves as a prequel to God's grand story. It invokes two powerful ancient metaphors—God as patron and God as host—for all of the world.

The average first century inhabitants of the Mediterranean world would have understood God (or the gods) as their ultimate patron or benefactor.<sup>25</sup> God's help came as "grace" (*charis*)—gifts from God—because God helped humans without calculating or seeking a return on his investment. Human beings, in gratitude for God's help, responded with trust (*pistis*), thanksgiving, praise, and their own gifts at opportune moments. I certainly recognize aspects of patron-client relationships in many New Testament texts. I think much can be learned from this metaphor—especially if this is the relationship Israel's religious leaders settled for. But is this all that God wants for us? Reading John's Gospel, it does not seem to be what Jesus had in mind for his disciples.<sup>26</sup> It also seems too limited in view of Romans 5:6-11:

<sup>6</sup>You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

<sup>9</sup>Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! <sup>10</sup>For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! <sup>11</sup>Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

---

<sup>25</sup> There is a growing body of literature analyzing the language and the relationships witnessed in the New Testament in terms of on-going patron-client relationships. Begin with Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, third edition, revised and expanded (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 95-96, 103-05; and then see David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). DeSilva discusses the use of grace (*charis*) in patron-client relationships (104-19) and faithfulness and trust (*pistis*) as a subset of the client's response (115-19). This discussion falls within a longer discussion of "Patronage and Reciprocity" (95-119) and a discussion of "Patronage and Grace in the New Testament" (120-156). DeSilva gives a summary of all of this in an article on "Patronage" in Craig Evans and Stanley Porter, editors, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 766-71. One can track the relevant associated literature through either of deSilva's bibliographies. See E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing the Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 160-66 for an imaginative and helpful recounting of a patron-client relationship.

<sup>26</sup> Briefly, in John's Gospel, when we receive Jesus we receive the authority to become the children of God (1:12, 3:6-8). We become friends with Jesus (15:12-15). Most to the point, is the relationship envisioned in John 17:20-26. We are caught up into the very love of the Father and the Son.

Arguably, this could be taken as an example of a glorious patron being exceptionally generous to ungrateful, unworthy, and even sacrilegious clients.<sup>27</sup> But Paul's reach is beyond this as we follow him through Romans 8:15-17: God gives us life, adopts us, moves us to cry "Abba, Father," and makes us co-heirs with Christ.<sup>28</sup> This being noted, we need to develop the second metaphor of God as the host of all the world.

### The Hospitality of God

Ancient Mediterranean hospitality has been the subject of carefully study in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Scholars have identified remarkably similar patterns for the practice of receiving strangers into one's home in ancient Greek, Roman, and Hebrew sources.<sup>30</sup> Before summarizing these practices, we need to hear two warnings.

First, we have been partially blinded to the issues in ancient hospitality by our individualism. We have misread Scripture with Western eyes,<sup>31</sup> and we read our practices back onto earlier generations. For us, entertaining others is a choice, not a duty. We rarely think, "My poor choices will damage my extended family's reputation and shame my village." People in the first century could not imagine living as an individual with little fear of what many significant others would think.

Second, we are very likely to misunderstand the importance of hospitality as it was practiced in the ancient Mediterranean and near-Eastern world. Consider this claim: Hospitality was "seen as one of the pillars of morality upon which the universe stands. When guests or hosts violate their obligations to one another, the

---

<sup>27</sup> See deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 109, 117.

<sup>28</sup> DeSilva's fine volume on *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* lays the patron – client relationship side by side with kinship relationships. But it says little to help the reader discern when one would relate to God as patron and when one would relate to God as *Abba*. This can be an acute question when one notes that "Behaving toward your kin as you would toward outsiders was reprehensible, a mark of dishonor within the family" (166). Dr. deSilva was kind enough to respond to my emailed request for clarification. He would embed the kinship relationship within the patron-client relationship. He puts it simply: "Within the scope of acting as an over-the-top-generous patron, God has made us family" (email on March 12, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> An accessible article on hospitality in the wider biblical context can be found in S.C. Barton, "Hospitality" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, edited by Ralph Martin and Peter Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 501-07. For a brief description of hospitality in God's grand story, see Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 27-32. The broadest survey of practices can be found in Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting*. New Testament Monographs, 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> In the brief description that follows, I am further simplifying the conclusions from Arterbury's *Entertaining Angels*, 182-91. Additional references are included for biblical examples of many points.

<sup>31</sup> One can begin to understand the importance of this claim with Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*: 9-23, 95-112. An extended discussion of "The First Century Personality" can be found in Malina, *The New Testament World*, 58-80.

whole world shakes and retribution follows.”<sup>32</sup> Again, the strength of this morality was not grounded in one's individual sense of duty or guilt, but flowed from a powerful and collective sense of keeping honor and not being shamed.<sup>33</sup>

Hospitality began with meeting at a well in a rural setting,<sup>34</sup> in the village square,<sup>35</sup> or at the town or city gate.<sup>36</sup> Either the host or the guest could make the first contact as an offer or request for hospitality<sup>37</sup> for a brief stay of one to three days.<sup>38</sup> After a brief conversation,<sup>39</sup> the traveler followed the host to the home. As the guest entered the home, both the guest and the host were committed to culturally scripted protocols for the protection and comfort of the guest.

The host provided for the guest's comfort by sheltering him from danger<sup>40</sup> and by providing a meal<sup>41</sup> and an opportunity to bathe.<sup>42</sup> The meal could be sumptuous with a wealthy host,<sup>43</sup> or simple with a more humble hostess.<sup>44</sup> Normally, the host would refrain from questioning the guest before he had eaten. A good guest provided some information about his travels and mission after he had eaten.<sup>45</sup> The host provided a place for the guest to sleep and provided for the care of the guest's animals.<sup>46</sup> The host provided for the next phase of the guest's journey, and escorted him to the edge of the host's territory.<sup>47</sup> This basic model for ancient

---

<sup>32</sup> John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission. Overtures to Biblical Theology*, 17 (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Richards and O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*: 113-36. Again, an extended discussion can be found in Malina, *The New Testament World*, 27-57 and especially in David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity*, 23-93.

<sup>34</sup> In some stories, the traveler simply approached the door of the home from which he hoped to find assistance (Genesis 18:1-2). For meetings at wells, see Genesis 24:11; Exodus 2:15; I Samuel 9:11-13; John 4:6.

<sup>35</sup> Judges 19:14-15.

<sup>36</sup> See Genesis 19:1-2; I Kings 17:10.

<sup>37</sup> In Genesis 18, the guests approach Abraham's tent, and then Abraham invites them as his guests. The Gibeonites approach Joshua in Joshua 9:6. In I Kings 17:7-16, Elijah initiates the guest-friendship relationship. Jesus sends his disciples to ask for hospitality in Mark 14:13-14. Jesus asks to stay with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:5 and asks for water in John 4:7. Paul asks for hospitality in Romans 15:22-23, 32. The host initiates the encounter in Genesis 24:29-30; Luke 7:36; Acts 10:22-23.

<sup>38</sup> Genesis 24:54,59; Judges 19:4; Jeremiah 14:8; John 4:40; Acts 10:23.

<sup>39</sup> The initial conversation might establish the worthiness of the guest and the host (Acts 10:22-23). Jews preferred hosting and staying with Jews for purity reasons, while in Christian encounters, one might briefly establish a minimal agreement about Jesus' incarnation and the traveler's purposes (I John 7-11, III John 8-10).

<sup>40</sup> See Genesis 19:5-9; Joshua 2; Judges 19:22-25.

<sup>41</sup> Genesis 19:3, 24:33; Judges 19:21; II Kings 4:8; Luke 7:36.

<sup>42</sup> Genesis 18:3-5, 19:2, 24:32, 43:24; Judges 19:21.

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 18:6-8, 43:33; I Samuel 9:24; Psalm 23:5-6.

<sup>44</sup> See I Kings 17:7-16.

<sup>45</sup> In Genesis 18, the serious conversation happens after the meal (see verses 9-15).

<sup>46</sup> Genesis 19:2, 24:25, 32, 43:24; Judges 19:4, 21; II Kings 4:10.

<sup>47</sup> Genesis 18:16; Romans 15:24; I Corinthians 16:6; II Corinthians 1:16; Titus 3:13; III John 6.

Mediterranean hospitality called for a sense of reciprocity. If the host were ever in the guest's region, the former host would expect to be similarly hosted.

As practiced, this hospitality with a stranger presented an opportunity for profound learning and even transformation.<sup>48</sup> This is especially true because in Greek stories, the stranger was often an important person or deity traveling incognito. The same was true in Jewish and early Christian stories: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

In a world where it was normal to establish on-going alliances based on perceived mutual interest,<sup>49</sup> the basic model for hospitality often developed into guest-friendships. When the guest and host were of similar economic and social status, they exchanged gifts symbolic of their friendship of roughly similar value. In rare cases when the economic and social status of the host and guest were dissimilar, the relationship would approximate other patron-client relationships. In such cases, hosts gave elaborate gifts—especially new clothes—to the traveler.<sup>50</sup> The guest would reciprocate either then or at a later date. In the most amazing stories of hospitality, the basic model—the welcome of strangers—led though a guest-friendship to kinship.<sup>51</sup>

Let me bring this discussion of hospitality into focus with the above prequel. God creates the cosmos and especially this world to display his glory<sup>52</sup> and for the benefit of his creatures.<sup>53</sup> Foreseeing our fall and ruin, God—Father, Son and Holy

---

<sup>48</sup> One sees this especially in I Kings 17:7-24; John 4:39-43, and Acts 10:23-48.

<sup>49</sup> Malina, *The New Testament World*, 94-97.

<sup>50</sup> Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels*, 185.

<sup>51</sup> Isaac and Moses received their wives via hospitality (Genesis 24:50-51; Exodus 2:21). There is an interesting discussion in Arterbury (*Entertaining Angels*, 39-40) suggesting that hospitality relationships paralleled the institution of marriage in bringing strangers into kinship groups.

<sup>52</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Books, 2009) argues convincingly that the world is God's temple, and that the Garden—and finally the heavenly city Jerusalem come down to earth—is the "holy of holies." I will develop this idea at greater length in chapter six.

<sup>53</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos/Baker, 2005) uses the language of generosity in his analysis of God's goodness in creation. His discussion fits well with my discussion of hospitality. Speaking of Genesis 1-2:3, Middleton writes: "The text, then, by its careful literary artistry, evokes a creator-God carefully constructing an artful world according to a well-thought-out plan for the benefit of creatures" (77). "The world is both a kingdom over which God rules and a cosmic building where a variety of creatures may live fruitfully together and flourish" (81). "God in Genesis 1 creates for the benefit of the creature, without explicitly asking for a direct return of any kind. And humans, in God's image, I suggest, are expected to imitate this primal generosity in their own shared rule of the earth" (211). Kelly M. Kopic uses the language of hospitality: "God is full and he makes full. Thus, as he creates, he invites us to enjoy the feast and to extend his gracious hospitality and care to others; in this way we are images of our creator." See Kelly M. Kopic with Justin Borger, *God so Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 22. Douglas H. Knight provides much for us to ponder as he interprets the created world as God's royal estate in his *The*

Spirit— plans to welcome us as strangers, make us friends, and ultimately incorporate us into his own family. God invites us as host, offers his patronage while he teaches us to be friends, woos us to become family, and finally allows us to share in his mission.<sup>54</sup> *All of this is very live in John's Gospel.* Here is how this looks:

As his Father's Son, Jesus comes as the unrecognized guest (John 1:10-11, 14; 4:12-14; 5:38-40; 6:41-42) and mediates our relationship with the Father (John 1:18, 29; 2:18-22; 13:1-17; 17:3, 6-8, 25). He bids us "Come and see" (John 1:39, 50-51). He invites us to follow after him (John 1:43) and learn his ways (John 13:34-35). Receiving Jesus allows us to know God and receive eternal life (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:28-29; 17:3).

As his Father's Son, Jesus becomes our host and he shares his Father's life as light with us (John 1:4; 5:21, 26; 17:20-23). He protects us (John 1:5; 10:11-18; 17:11). He serves us and washes our feet (John 13:3-17). He prepares a room for us (John 14:1-3).<sup>55</sup> He offers us his friendship (John 15:13-15). He gives us the gift of God's Spirit (John 1:33; 20:21-23) and allows us to become family (John 1:12; 3:3-8; 17:20-26).

As those who share in the Holy Spirit, Jesus calls us into the oneness and mission of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus sends his disciples into the world because they know and live in his Father's love (John 17:18). Our reception of the Spirit allows us to share this hospitality with others as we wash their feet, show them love and acceptance in every profound way, forgive their sins, and provide for their need—spiritually and materially (John 13:17; 14:34-35; 20:21-23; 21:15-17; I John 3:16-18).

Said simply, and expanding the references to humanity to include all of creation, we can celebrate the prequel as "God-in-community on a mission to show his love and hospitality to all creation." This affirms the absolute goodness of God and celebrates his hospitality to strangers. Of course it also begs for answers to our questions about suffering and evil. What went wrong?

---

*Eschatological Economy: Time and the Hospitality of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 21, 23, 96-98, 156, and 159.

<sup>54</sup> In defense of my continued use of the first person plural "us" in what follows, I am invoking not only the "whosoever wills" but also Jesus inclusion of "us" in John 10:16-17 and 17:20-26.

<sup>55</sup> God's hospitality in Revelation 21-22 is profound. The heavenly city, now come to earth, centers on the throne, the river of life, and the garden on both sides of the river. The invitation stands: "To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life" (21:6). And again, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:1-2). And finally, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (22:17).





Greetings to all: This is a third public draft of Chapter Four. What else does it need? Where is this too much? Is it real enough? Thanks in advance! James.