The Healing of the Nations

The writer John is writing to struggling believers meeting in secret behind locked doors in cities along the Aegean seaboard around AD 95. He tells them that a time is coming when every tear will be wiped from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Then he tells them about an astonishing city, a new Jerusalem, enormous beyond imagination. The river of the water of life, clear as crystal, flows from the throne of God down the middle of the great street of the city (Revelation 22:1-5). On each side of the river stands the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruits, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. The throne of God and of the Lamb is in the city, and his servants serve him. They see his face, and his name is on their foreheads. And they reign forever and ever.

What I especially want us to see is what is said in Revelation 21-22 about the nations or “the peoples” of the earth. The nations will walk by the light of this city (21:24). The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it (21:26). The leaves of the tree of life in the center of the city are for the healing of the nations (22:2). With this we are reminded of something we often forget—that God’s concern is not just for individuals; it’s for the nations or the peoples of the world. This new Jerusalem is all about the healing of the nations. And as we have seen previously, this new Jerusalem is not strictly Heaven as we understand it, but something that comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband, that is, the church, in the words of Hebrews 12:22, “the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, the church of the firstborn,” to which believers have already come.

John is celebrating the triumph and glory of the church. The nations will walk by its light, and the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it, not into imperial Rome, but into Christ’s church, all so that the nations might be healed. The church is not just about saving our own souls from Hell, which strictly speaking is only narcissism. The business of the church—that is, the business of its people—is: peacemaking; ending age-old feuds; building trust and understanding and compassion between nations and peoples; addressing the despair and hopelessness from which rage and violence come; contesting patterns of prejudice and discrimination everywhere, and certainly within the church; and encouraging our own governments to do those things that lead to the healing of the nations. The church addresses the wounds of nations. It looks out for society’s most vulnerable. It contests militaristic idolatry which always undermines the soul of a nation. It responds to fears and smoldering animosities. It overcomes the great divide within nations between men and women, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, rich and poor, black, white, Asian and Hispanic. It encourages our children and our grandchildren to become humanitarian aid workers, ministers and missionaries, lawmakers and diplomats, educators, artists and writers, and medical and scientific researchers that work toward the healing of the nations.

Remember and do not forget that salvation is always so much larger than we suppose. It’s larger than it looks from the hill country of Tennessee. It’s larger than it looks from Wall
Street. It’s larger than eighteenth- or twenty-first-century thought can grasp. It’s larger than we have ever imagined. In the words of Jesus in John 3:17, it’s about saving the world. The very word “salvation” is first the Hebrew word yeshu’a, from which comes the name Jesus, and it has an original meaning of “to be roomy or broad” as opposed to being hemmed in, imprisoned or restricted. In Jesus’ day it meant “to free, come to the help of, give aid to, deliver or rescue,” as in God saving Israel from Egypt. It’s to be saved from danger, from harm, from disease, from evil intent or violence, and it’s very much a hands-on, this-world, here-and-now, real-life understanding of salvation. It’s God’s new reality on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus is about so much more than just saving our souls from Hell. He’s about saving the world, the flow of history, the majesty of creation, the wonder of the universe, the whole thing, the whole process from beginning to end, the unfolding of the story from beginning to end. Yes, he’s about saving souls, but he’s also about saving this planet and the people on this planet from destruction. He’s about the redemption of the cosmos, the stars in their galaxies, the plants and animals, the rivers and seas, the forests and fields. The coming of Jesus is about cities with rivers of crystal-clear water flowing through them. The story we find ourselves in is not just individualistic. It’s not just about me. Maybe it’s not primarily individualistic. It certainly is about the healing of the nations. It’s global. It’s about saving the planet from greed, from fear, from lust, from hypocrisy, from leaders lying to their peoples, from prejudice and discrimination, from violence and racism and war.

There is a remarkable chapter near the very beginning of Scripture. It’s Genesis 10, and it’s unique in ancient literature. It’s a Table of the Nations descended from Noah and his three sons. It lists all the nations known to its author: Ashkenaz, Tarshish, Cush, Canaan, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Elam, Asshur, seventy in all, telling us as Scripture begins that God’s concern has always been for the nations. And so today God’s concerns is, yes, for America, but also for Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, and Albania, the Israelis and the Palestinians, Iraq and Iran and Afghanistan, South Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, Sri Lanka, North Korea, Haiti and Venezuela, India and Pakistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and the Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, Indonesia and East Timor, China and Taiwan, the Philippines, Syria, Russia, and Turkey. And those are only nations embroiled in recent conflicts and disputes.

The need, now more than ever, is for God’s people everywhere to engage in the healing of the nations. The way of Jesus is so much more than “the right church” and “the right baptism.” That may be all some people want because it excuses everything else! But it’s so much deeper. It demands so much more! It may take prominent world leaders, men of power and privilege, personally addressing their enemies, “If you’re that angry, if only blood will satisfy you, take mine!” It’s still the way of Jesus. It’s what he did. It’s the message and way of the Cross. And this is the only story in which we can find ourselves. There must be on earth a new people redeemed and transformed, skilled in the arts of trust and forgiveness, a new humanity, a worldwide movement, a global network devoted
to peace, so that beside ever network of terror there is a network of love undermining, and if necessary absorbing, the hate and the violence.

The story we find ourselves in involves the healing of the nations. It may take Christians deeply respecting the Qur’an so that one day Muslims will deeply respect the ways of Jesus. It may take Christians, rather than supposing that they alone have the truth, respecting the wisdom of the East, knowing, for instance, that the great spiritual classics of the world often read like an addendum to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Our story is large enough for all the other stories of the world. And it’s a story that ends beautifully, yes, with justice done, in ways only God can know and accomplish, but also with “good news of great joy that will be for all the people,” with a multitude saved, rescued, healed, the image of God shining radiantly within them, a multitude being transformed into the likeness of the Lord with ever-increasing glory. But this story must get out to good people everywhere who are desperate to hear it.

—Dale Pauls