

The Surprise of the Mission of God

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North of Jerusalem, halfway up the climbing road to Ramallah, a ten-meter-high concrete wall cuts abruptly through Palestinian neighborhoods and blocks the way for Palestinians journeying into Jerusalem from the West Bank. This is the “dividing barrier” according to Israel, the “Apartheid Wall” to Palestinians. In the Palestinian village of Kalandia, through which the wall passes, a checkpoint manned by Israeli Defense Forces personnel controls the only way past the wall. Exhausting lines of weary Palestinian travelers shuffle agonizingly slowly through the pen-like maze of locked doors and barred passageways. Finally, arriving at the inches-thick bulletproof window they must present their permit to an Israeli officer. Without the proper papers they are turned back without discussion.

This wall and checkpoint arouse strong passions. To many Israelis they represent security from Palestinian suicide bombers. Palestinians have a very different perspective: they see the wall as one more expression of an oppressive policy to take more Palestinian land. Departing from the “green line” armistice line of 1967, the wall passes deep into the Palestinian West Bank, separating farmers from their land, children from their schools, workers from their offices.

Ironically, many Israelis and Palestinians do agree that the wall represents something else: the boundary of God’s love. For many Israelis and their ardent supporters, God’s blessings in the territory of ancient Israel rest exclusively on the Jewish people. The gift of the land is solely theirs. Their possession of it in its entirety is the project that God endorses. From this widely held popular perspective not only does God’s blessing, his love and grace, not extend to Palestinians, but in fact they are under the weight of God’s curse because of their opposition to Israel. As the Scripture states:

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I will bless those who bless you,
 and whoever curses you I will curse;
 and all peoples on earth
 will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:3)²

Conversely it is very difficult for many Palestinian Christians to consider God's love extending to Israel, their tormentors. How can God love such a people as the citizens of the modern State of Israel who have acted so unjustly? There certainly are individuals whose lives shine as examples of reconciliation in the Palestinian community.³ For many Palestinians—even those in the Christian community—to rise above the wounds they have suffered is impossible. They cannot consider God's love for their Jewish neighbors.

The inability to conceive of God's grace extending beyond the wall to the "other," and the attendant claim to rightness in the conflict, are attitudes that fuel the bitter conflict between Israel and Palestine, and so the suffering goes on. In fact, it was the suffering of Palestinian lives in this conflict that first drew me to Palestine. I had been living in Manila, the Philippines, when I first met a young Palestinian who was studying theology there. This young man, Jack Sara—who has since become the president of Bethlehem Bible College—shared with us the needs of the Palestinian community: their isolation from much of the international Christian community, the lack of engagement by Christians with the majority Muslim community, and the need for Christians to be encouraged in their faith.

Jack's spiritual journey was also compelling. Formerly he had been an activist in opposing Israeli's occupation of Palestine, and was subsequently arrested numerous times. After a powerful conversion experience he turned to Christ and away from confrontational activism, which in Israel and Palestine often lead to violence.

If the suffering of the Palestinian community and testimonies such as Jack's had first drawn me to Palestine, it was the example of their forgiveness that kept me there during the height of the violence of the Second Intifada (Uprising). Their grace in the face of great difficulty helped me dismantle interior barriers to loving the "other." Palestinian friends allowed me to appreciate anew the surprise of the mission of God.

² Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

³ Such individuals are highlighted in the present author's text, *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013).

The Surprise of the Mission of God

The surprise of the mission of God is that his love and compassion cannot be bounded by walls which we might construct of concrete, of national pride, of theological exclusivity, or of religious affiliation. As soon as we try to domesticate God's grace, to make it the possession of "our" people, God will demonstrate his love in surprising ways; his grace will be given to those regarded as enemies.

That surprise is first revealed biblically in the unfolding of the mission of God in the first family of mission: Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac. The mission of God to bless all of humanity explicitly began with Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Abraham's call was not intended to exclude those outside his family; rather, he and his descendants were to be agents of the inclusion of the other nations.

Yet, in this first family the difficulty of advancing the mission of God, and not hindering it by our humanness, was also underscored. After Isaac's birth to Sarah and Abraham, Hagar and her son by Abraham, Ishmael, were seen as obnoxious competitors. "Cast them out," Sarah instructs Abraham. Abraham is deeply troubled. To cast them out in the desert, without the aid of their tribe, would certainly send them to their death. It is terrible for Abraham to send his first son to an agonizing death by dehydration, but God instructs him to follow Sarah's command, because God has a plan (Gen. 21:8–13).

This first family of mission therefore chose to curse instead of bless. Yet, it is through their harshness towards the unwanted son that the surprise of the mission of God is first clearly seen.

The Scripture portrays a pitiful scene. After their water is exhausted, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush and then removes herself far enough away so as not to hear the boy's cries in his thirst. Then when it seems that all hope is gone for these outcasts from the people of God, an angel of God speaks. God has heard the boy crying. God will not let him perish. Because Ishmael also is a child of Abraham, God will make of his descendants a great nation as well (Gen. 21:14–18). God causes Hagar to see a spring that begins to flow for their salvation.

Then we have this powerful statement that reveals the surprise, the true nature, of the mission of God: "God was with the boy as he grew up" (Gen. 21:20). *Where* was God? God was *with the boy*? This was not a transitory blessing. The Lord would dwell with Hagar and Ishmael in the desert.

What? Did God get his signals crossed? Was he camping with the *wrong* people who were *not* the people of God? Not at all. This is the surprise of the mission of God. He is working outside the camp of the people of God, ex-

tending his love to those least expected. This speaks to us that God is always working by his Spirit outside of the Christian community, revealing his love, drawing the people to himself with cords of compassion.

As I recount in *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians*, one of my prized possessions is of a photograph of Yasser Arafat with his ever-present, black-and-white-checked *kafiyeh*, or head scarf, inspecting his uniformed security guard. The average American Christian, if they happened to see this photograph in the media, would most likely not consider this renegade crew as being likely candidates for the blessing of God. If anyone is beyond the reasonable reach of God's grace, it must be men like this, the leader who was regarded by many as an author of terrorism.

In the front row in the photograph is a young man in a red beret. His name is Ahmad. Raised in Kuwait where his Muslim father was a businessman, he was repatriated to Palestine when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. As a troubled teen in his parents' village, Ahmad's future was bleak. Eventually, after various jobs in the building trade, he found his way to the Palestinian security services, the internationally sanctioned police force of the Palestinian Authority, becoming part of Arafat's personal security team.

The wall and all the hostilities it represents could not hinder the work of God's Spirit in this young Muslim man. His attention drawn to the gospel of Jesus through a Christian radio broadcast from Monaco, he began to read the Bible surreptitiously. In time he turned his heart towards Christ in faith. Ahmad said that the (unlikely!) verse that convinced him of the truth of Christ was Matthew 15:11: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean.'" It has been fifteen years since his decision to follow Christ. During this time it has been my pleasure to work with Ahmad in the ministry of Living Stones Student Center, which we helped found in Bir Zeit, a Palestinian village on the West Bank.

A Muslim. A member of Yasser Arafat's security detail. An opponent of Israel. Ahmad was an unlikely candidate for God's love in Christ. Ahmad's conversion emphasizes that God's grace will not be confined by the boundaries we create—whether physical, cultural, theological, or spiritual. But that should not be a surprise. Jesus continually shocked the disciples with the grace he extended to the unlikely.

Today in the ancient city of Jericho in the Jordan River valley there is a sycamore tree that stands in the place where tradition has it that Zacchaeus once climbed a sycamore to catch a glimpse of Jesus. According to the biblical account, of all the crowd around Jesus it was Zacchaeus whom Jesus called down

from the tree, announcing that he intended to visit his home (Luke 19:1–6). The reaction of the crowd—which included Jesus’ disciples—was not good: “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). A tax collector—and a corrupt one at that—who worked for the despised Roman occupiers did not deserve the attention of Jesus. And yet it is this man Jesus chooses to meet. Unlikely suspects to receive God’s grace are not only found outside of “our” people. Here is an outcast *within* Israel.

With Ahmad, a son of Ishmael, and Zacchaeus, a son of Isaac, the mission of God is underscored: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost,” Jesus said (Luke 19:10). By the Spirit of God Jesus is always working beyond our self-imposed boundaries. But the mission of God does not end when people encounter the grace of God outside of our boundaries. He intends to draw them into the community of his people, however uncomfortable their presence may be to us.

Consider Ishmael. God not only met him in the desert, but God then drew him back into the fold of Abraham’s family. At Abraham’s death both Isaac and *Ishmael* participated in his burial (Gen. 25:9). Both brothers were together, tenderly carrying their father to his grave in the cave of Machpelah at Mamre.

This reunion could not have been easy. With some poetic license we can surmise that Ishmael would have had to put aside what lingering bitterness he must have felt from having been cast out by Isaac’s mother. And Isaac? Imagine the anxiety he likely felt toward this potential usurper who might seek revenge for his exclusion as a child from his father’s house.

As for Zacchaeus, we only are given his side of the return back to his community, but it is an emphatic return! “But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’” (Luke 19:8). His first impulse in experiencing the grace of God was to seek reconciliation with those he had defrauded. With the return of their monies the people in Jericho might have been motivated to receive him!

In any event, with Zacchaeus’ willingness to recompense those who had been defrauded, Jesus declared that salvation had come to him. The mission of God is to restore those who have been forgiven and welcomed by God into the community of those who serve him. The mission of God always moves antagonists toward reconciliation. Remarkably, in spite of the wall that is meant to separate Israelis from Palestinians, and the hostility that it sparks, Christians on either side of it are working to be reconciled with each other.

Two summers ago I attended a remarkable meeting in Bethlehem on the West Bank for the launching of a devotional entitled *My Brother’s Keeper: A*

Daily Devotional.⁴ The book is a collection of three hundred sixty-five devotions, one for every day of the year. Remarkably, each day's entry was written by either a Palestinian Christian, an Israeli Arab Christian, or a Messianic Jew. For the dedication celebration the authors each shared a few words about the project. Finally, we all joined in a time of prayer. As voices were lifted in Hebrew and Arabic, Norwegian and English, it seemed like the glory of Pentecost might fall again!

In that room was evidence of the grace of God that can bring formerly hostile neighbors together not only to coexist, but to be joined in love for each other. This is the surprise of the mission of God. Does God love the Palestinian people? Yes! Are the Jewish people the object of his love? Again, yes! Finally, the surprise of the mission of God is that reconciliation can break down every wall of alienation and offense. This is the salvation of the Lord, as Jesus proclaimed when Zacchaeus sought to be reconciled with those he had offended.

Serving in Palestine and Israel is dangerous. The danger is not merely the risk of being caught in a flare-up of violence; rather, it is the threat of offense, the temptation to adopt a partisan perspective, judging those beyond the wall as enemies. Remarkable acts of reconciliation such as at the book launch have continually prodded me back into the way of Christ—the way of mercy, forgiveness, and love. I have also found encouragement to embrace the surprise of God's love in the community in which we worship.

Although I remain still deeply involved with a Palestinian Christian ministry on the West Bank, my wife and I needed to relocate to the United States a few years ago. As we searched for a community in which to worship outside of Philadelphia, we found a small Mennonite congregation. It has become a nurturing and healing place for us as it is immersed in the mission of God. The pastor and her husband spent twelve years in a reconciliation project in Ireland. Another elder served with his wife in Vietnam during the war. There he tried to be a bridge of understanding between Americans and Vietnamese.

Not surprisingly with this orientation towards reconciling the irreconcilable, the congregation brings together a unique mix of the old and young, African Americans and African immigrants, traditional Mennonites and newcomers such as ourselves. Every summer they now support summer camps for Palestinian kids on the West Bank. They are a continual reminder of the surprise of the mission of God that is central to Mennonite missions, and are an encouragement to us as we serve on the West Bank.

Who is regarded as unreachable, beyond the grace of God? What walls

⁴ *My Brother's Keeper: A Daily Devotional* (Jerusalem: The Bible Society, 2012).

have been built that mark the limitations of God's love? The surprise of the mission of God is that Jesus will always be found beyond our limits. Let us follow him there.