

The Father Who Names the Nations

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Seeing things from God's point of view may be the best way for us to envision an evangelized world. Our promise-keeping God has made it clear that He will bring forth blessing amidst every people. To bring forth blessing in every ethnicity, Christ has been unfolding His work throughout every ethnohistory, pursuing His purpose in the intricacies of every passing season. To fulfill our work of world evangelization we must think clearly, not only about how to bring the gospel to all *nations*; we must also consider how God's blessing will abound to all *generations*.

We Live in a Generational Story

Since the very beginning of languages and diverse cultures at Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), God has displayed His loving concern for all humanity by speaking of families, or all the peoples of the earth. How did He show His concern? In Genesis, the very next event after the Babel disaster is God speaking to Abram (Genesis 12:1–3). He promised not only to bring God's life and blessing to all peoples, but also that He would do so with the succeeding generations, the descendants, the "seed," of Abraham (Genesis 22:18, 26:4, 28:14). In the Abrahamic covenant we see God dealing with the totality of humanity as a family of many families with generational longevity and identity.

God the Father of All Peoples

In the coming of Jesus, God marvelously reveals Himself as Father. Jesus taught us clearly to trust the Most High God to act toward His people with devoted, vigilant parental love (Luke 11:13). In Christ, each person is known and loved by the heavenly Father as a daughter or a son. But the magnitude of God's fatherly love surpasses concern for each individual. Our God pursues

the redemption and honor of multigenerational peoples, as if each one of them were to Him a daughter or a son. The Father is bringing His entire family—a family of peoples—back to Himself.

Every Generational People Named, Known and Prized

Consider again Paul's prayer in his letter to the Ephesians:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name..." (Ephesians 3:14–15).

Paul prays to the Father—the same "Father of glory" to whom he prayed earlier (1:17). He is also the Father of all humanity, described by Paul as "every family in heaven and on earth." The Greek word for "family" is a specialized word, *patria*. This word was used to emphasize the multigenerational lineage of enduring peoples. The word implies an ongoing identity in ancestry and an expectation of descendants. The Father's family consists of peoples with any kind of generational depth.

Why does Paul say that these multigenerational peoples are named by God? In the honor-shame culture of that day, a name called out one's destiny, identity or anticipated honor. The Father knows and names each one of the peoples, like a human father would know the name, nature, the distinctive worth and likely destiny of each of his sons and daughters. Paul can sense the Father's joy and delight with the unique beauty and unfolding story of each of the peoples. Paul also knows the heartbreaking sorrow of the Father as He grieves for the people lost to Him. No wonder Paul bows his knees before this magnificent Father. It is all we can do to number the peoples. Our Father God names them.

To understand what and why Paul is praying, we should recognize who he's praying for. Paul was praying for Gentiles—non-Jewish people who, before being joined with Christ, understood themselves to be "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (2:12). Paul wanted to assure them that because of Christ's work on the cross, they had been reconciled to God, joined as a single entity, "in one body," with the people of Israel to enjoy "access in one Spirit to the Father" as God's people (2:16–18).

The Glory of the Nations

All of that matters because Paul was praying for "their glory" (3:13). Really? Glory somehow coming to the Gentiles? Isn't all glory supposed to go to God? What is this glory? The glory God has in store for the Gentiles is

the fulfillment of God's purpose for His global people—that together as one people, all the diverse nations would experience and display the relational fullness of His glory.

Paul uses the biblical imagery of a living temple to express the splendor of relational nearness that God desires with His people. The foundation of the building is already laid. Construction is underway:

“...Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit” (2:20–22).

Paul prays that God would act “according to the riches of His glory” (3:16) so that ultimately a temple made without hands, the “dwelling of God in the Spirit” (2:22) consisting of “all [not just some] of the saints” (3:18), would be filled with “all the fullness of God” (3:19).

It's tricky to imagine or value such an ineffable, ethereal thing as “the fullness of God.” That's why Paul clearly alludes to the biblical accounts of the construction of the tabernacle and the temple. God called for the tabernacle, not because He needed a house to live in, but because He desired a concrete way to be relationally near His people. “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). To “dwell” is not a matter of physical location. This kind of dwelling is God's way of being immensely near His people in celebratory, relational fullness.

When they finished building the tent, “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” as a visible cloud (Exodus 40:34–35). And generations later, when the son of David finished building the greater temple, again “the glory of the LORD filled the house” (2 Chronicles 7:1–3).

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:16–21 reveals that he was confident that Christ was in the process of constructing what these biblical stories had pre-figured: God would gather His entire people to Himself. They would be His people. He would be their God. And He would dwell in their midst.

Already the foundation of the later, greater temple had been laid. Paul says that it was being “fitted together” and somehow was organically “growing into a holy temple in the Lord” (2:20–21). So, Paul prays that those reading this letter (yes, that includes me and you!) would, together with “all the saints,” somehow comprehend the unknowable beauty and magnificence of the house that the son of David is now finishing. When complete, when

“every family” is gathered home, like the tabernacle and temple of old, God will fill His people with His glory—with “all the fullness of God” (3:18–19).

Paul adds this doxology, which might also serve as a manifesto of hope: “to Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen” (3:21). The glory of God resounding in the manifest beauty of Christ and the Church will somehow encompass all generations. There never will have been a day or a generation in which God has not been seen as ultimately working to bring forth the fullness of Christ and His Church.

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Knowing the Father's Joy and Zeal

Paul tries to persuade his Gentile friends “not to lose heart” when they hear of his “tribulations on your behalf” (3:13). He assures them that the pain and shame of apostolic labors that he has endured are well worth it. Why? I think Paul knew the heart of the Father of glory. This is the Father who constantly gazes on all of humanity, seeing us all as a great family of many families. He is unperturbed and never confused about intermarried or blended ethnicities. He sees, knows and values each of the peoples in all of their overlapping, intertwining multicultural complexity.

Like those to whom Paul was writing, we, too, can lose heart for any number of reasons. The tedium and grief of constant opposition is daunting. The costly hassle of cross-cultural labors can be discouraging. Let's bow our knees before our Father, the Father of glory, delighting in His growing joy as He draws His full family to Himself. As we celebrate the Father's relentless zeal to gather to Himself some from every tribe and tongue, every language and lineage, we will find our hearts encouraged in the hope of their glory in Christ. 