

Week Eight
Reading

COLLECTIVE ENGAGEMENT



Dear Child,

I got your letter. I wish more people would write honest letters like that. I welcome your thoughtful questions and genuine interest. I did not hear grumbling or complaining in your letter. I heard a heart of love that simply wants what's best. You live with partial knowledge and that's hard. You are understandably confused by what I've allowed and even what I've done. The world I created has great beauty, but it also abounds with pain. If you did not question the pain and hardship of this world, one could question your heart. Your questions come from love.

"Why create this world?" you asked. "Why orphans? Why murderers, rapists, serial killers, and dictators?" These are good questions, important questions, and it's good that they trouble you. I am not bothered by those troubled with evil. I am bothered by those who ignore it, who treat it as normal, who stand by and do nothing about it. Yes, it's confusing. Why would I allow this? Why would I create a world where these things happen? I expect and welcome these questions.

As you have discovered, much has been revealed in my Scriptures, but much remains concealed. I have given you enough to get you through, to show this is no accident. I have shown you my heart and aspects of my plan. The fullness of these answers, though, and the fullness of my plans cannot be contained in Scripture. There is more, much more, and one day you will see, and you will celebrate. But that day is not now. Dig deeply into my Scriptures. Grow in your understanding. With that, I must be honest. You will not find an answer to your every question. Now is not the time for full disclosure. Now is the time to act.

Yes, you could wait and wallow for total understanding. Many do and miss the opportunity of their lives. I am up to something and invite your participation. There is work to be done, and I have chosen to do it through you. It is not easy, but this work will allow you to give full vent to your heart of love. You will be asked to do things that feel risky. You will be stretched. At times, you will feel foolish. Through it all, though, I will be with you. I will walk with you. I will guide you. You will sense my presence, and even when you don't, you can know I am there. Together, we will bring about a different age, a different era, a different way of living.

Sincerely,

Me

WHY?

Time and again, a question is asked of God. It comes in a variety of forms. Simply put, it's this.

Why don't you do something?

Why don't you fix this, God? Why don't you act? Why don't you step in and bring about justice, mercy, and grace? Scripture does not pretend to give a complete answer to these questions. The story of Job, for example, underscores the limitations of human understanding. After experiencing tremendous hardship, Job questioned God. God's response was forthright.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!... Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this... Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? (Job 38:4-5, 18; 40:2)

In another place, God brings a similar message.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

With that said, lack of full disclosure does not mean no disclosure. The entire arc of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, puts God's plan on display. God is neither aloof nor uninvolved. Scripture reveals a sophisticated but simple plan that begins with the Garden of Eden, crescendos to the cross of Christ, and culminates in the New Jerusalem. Unbeknown to many, but clearly revealed in Scripture, God is creating the very world for which we long that will one day be inhabited by the very people we long to be. This powerful act of redemption, being worked out in and through the ages, is creating an experience far greater than the Garden of Eden. God has been, and continues to be, at work.

Which leads to a critical question.

Will I join God in his work?

It's not uncommon to answer this question positively. "Yes, I'll join God in his work. I'll make a difference." But verbal affirmation and actual follow through are two different things. Truly engaging the body of Christ, truly engaging the needs around us takes sacrifice and is at times both messy and tiresome. We instinctively know this, which takes us to the locker room.

THE LOCKER ROOM

The door is shut, the players are dressed, and the coach stands in the middle of the circled team. They know the game plan; they've studied it all week. With a bit more passion and focus, though, the coach restates their plan. Each and every day they've heard the very strategy their coach is restating at this very moment. They like it. They get it. They know their role, and they know the roles of others on the team. They've memorized their plays and practiced them extensively. Coach is saying nothing new. They get it and are ready.

But then it's time to take the field. It's time to get up and off the locker room benches and go out to face the opposition. Heads nod and there's the slap of high fives, but the oddest of things then happens. The coach opens the door, and nobody moves. They back up. They sit back down. They look at the coach, and then nervously look the other way. The coach is bewildered. More than that, he's frustrated. "What's the problem?" he yells to the room. Nobody responds. They just look at him and do nothing.

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In time, the problem is voiced. The team likes to talk about the game, they like to study the game, they even like to practice the game, but stepping out on the field is an entirely different deal. They might lose. They might get hurt. They might make an error and embarrass themselves or their team. The locker room is a much safer place to be, and the practice field is easier than the game field. It's easier to play when nobody's watching. The team likes to talk about the game, plan for the game, and practice the game, but not really play the game.

NOT A GAME

The locker room analogy is clear enough. We get it. As we engage this *Morph* experience, we are in the locker room. That makes sense. This is preparation, and if we never do anything with this preparation, it was all for nothing. The analogy breaks down, though, at one critical place. The locker room describes a pre-game experience. It's just a *game*. In games, one team wins, the other team loses, then everyone goes home. The experience for which we are preparing here, however, is not a game. The stakes are exceedingly high.

Consider Moses' exhortation toward the end of his life...

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

Loving God and calling others to love God is not an exercise. We don't study this work or seek inspiration for this work so we can simply add a little volunteerism to our lives because that's a good thing to do. Christ described the high stakes when addressing a group of people he called "friends":

"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him... I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. (Luke 12:4-5, 8-9)

Yes, this is strong language, but the stakes of this work demand strong language. James, the half brother of Jesus, echoes this strong message from Christ.

Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:20)

The world around us is hurting, desperately so, but the pain is often covered by a thin veil of respectability. Participants of the body of Christ participate in a movement that offers lasting hope and depth of healing. This is no game. Full participation is essential.

Many things can distract us. We know this. Maybe what's most surprising about these many distractions, though, is their nature. The most powerful distractions, the things that will keep us from fully engaging and participating in the body of Christ, will be most distracting not because they are evil, but because they are good. To see this more clearly, let's consider Haggai and the houses of Israel.

HOUSES

The people of Israel rebelled. They disobeyed the commands of God, and as he promised, their disobedience led to intense hardship. Jerusalem was ransacked, the Temple was destroyed, and as a people, they were literally hauled off to another country, Babylon. Years passed, and the Israelites

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repented. Because of their repentance, God moved the heart of the Babylonian king to let the Israelites return to their homeland and restore their way of life. This was, of course, very exciting, but it was no easy task. The very short book of Haggai is a fascinating account of what happened in the midst of the restoration.

Hear carefully the exhortation to Israel through the prophet Haggai.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." (Haggai 1:5-6)

So through Haggai, God tells the people to take notice, to "Give careful thought to your ways." He wanted them to notice that despite their efforts, their work was not producing the anticipated results. They would plant seed, but the harvest was disproportionate to the amount they planted. They would earn wages, but the money would slip away as if there were holes in their purses. God wanted the people to notice this. Why?

You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. (Haggai 1:9)

Their expectations weren't met, not because they didn't know how to plant seed or conduct business. Their expectations weren't met because "What you brought home, I blew away." God was frustrating their work to get their attention. Something was off. What was it?

"What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house." (Haggai 1:9)

Picture the scene. The people of Israel returned to their land. Tumbleweeds blew through the streets. It was in ruins. Understandably, they would need to establish residencies. They had to have homes to live in, but it seems they took it further than this and did so at the neglect of restoring the Temple.

Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin? (Haggai 1:4)

They didn't just establish functional homes so they could then do what was most important, re-establish the center of their faith. Rather, they built "paneled houses." They called in the interior decorators and landscapers. They worked double time to establish their own ease and comfort. All the while, as they were coordinating colors and getting it all just right, the downed Temple of God lay dormant and in ruins. Their actions, and their inactions, proclaimed their priorities. Ask any one of them, and sure, they wanted the Temple rebuilt; they wanted to serve God. But they wanted to do so when it was convenient, when everything else they cared about was complete, when they had fulfilled their own wishes and wants.

The people responded.

They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius. (Haggai 1:14-15)

So they kicked into action. This was good. This exhortation, though, was restated. It's when we looked very carefully at this restated exhortation that we discover one of the more stunning statements in all of Scripture.

"Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," declares the LORD, "and work. For I am with you," declares the LORD Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear." (Haggai 2:4-5)

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The stunning nature of this exhortation isn't seen in full on a first pass. Hear it carefully though. The high priest is a man named "Joshua son of Jehozadak." Concerning this very Joshua, and speaking at this very time, Zechariah writes:

Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come... (Zechariah 3:8)

Joshua, the high priest, is said to be symbolic of things to come. With that in mind, consider carefully two things. Consider his name, and consider what they're doing.

His name is "Joshua son of Jehozadak." The name *Joshua*, when translated from Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) to Greek (the language of the New Testament) is *Jesus*. That's interesting, but it's especially interesting when one considers his entire name. He is called "Joshua son of Jehozadak." *Jehozadak* is two words put together—*Jehovah*, which means Yahweh, the sacred name for God, and *Zadak*, which means righteous. So *Jehozadak* means Righteous Yahweh, or we might say, Righteous God.

So "Joshua son of Jehozadak," the man who Zechariah said was "symbolic of things to come," could be read as "Jesus son of the righteous God." Which is intriguing, but especially so when we consider what Joshua and his people were doing.

They were building the Temple. So this Joshua son of Jehozadak, a man who Scripture says is symbolic of things to come, and whose name translates Jesus son of God, is leading the people in the rebuilding of the Temple. Consider, then, the New Testament description of the Temple.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)

Or in another place we read...

You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house. (1 Peter 2:5)

The Temple of God, the House of God, is being built today. It is being built with living stones, and the building project, just like the building project in the time of Haggai, is being led by *Joshua son of Jehozadak*, but not the symbolic *Joshua*. Today's building project is led by the one the symbolic Joshua symbolized.

So hear this carefully. The exhortation to the people of Haggai's time was for them, but in its fullness, it is a strong exhortation to us. With that in mind, hear it again...

"Be strong, O Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," declares the LORD, "and work. For I am with you," declares the LORD Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear." (Haggai 2:4-5)

We are to be strong. We are to work. We are to do this because God is with us just as he promised to be with us when he pulled us out of our own Egypt, our own enslavement to sin. His Spirit remains in us, and we need not fear. But we, too, just like the Israelites, are enticed to build our own houses with the intention of building the house of God once we get everything else just the way we want it. Rather than living in simplicity so we can focus on what matters most, we are easily dragged away by the countless good things in life rather than focusing on the one thing that truly matters. The Israelites were not enticed away from building the house of God by blatant evil, such as murder, rape, or theft. They were seduced by the quiet pull of good things that seemed appropriate. Why not build their houses just the way they wanted them? Why not pad their lives and make themselves as comfortable as possible? They had every intention of building the house of God, too, once they had time. They just needed to get themselves comfortable first. But we all know it doesn't work that way. When we take the "once I have time" approach, there will never be time. When we make our own "houses" the

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priority, there will always be another project on the list. Such is especially true when we consider not just the metaphor of houses, but when we consider the countless ways we can busy our lives with good things.

We can go from thing to thing, activity to activity, letting our lives slip away not into anything we'd consider evil, but into countless good things that distract us from the main thing. Every project—whether they be literal projects around the house or the countless activities of life—will have a degree of legitimacy. Are the activities for the kids not legitimate? Do they not need this for their development? Is working overtime not legitimate? Does it not provide for our needs? Is it not legitimate to exercise or to relax or to do things that are fun? Absolutely. It's all legitimate. These are good and decent things to do, and many of them, we should do, but when soccer for the kids or ambition for the promotion or obsession over personal health or endless hours in front of the television overrun our lives, then something is off and one can legitimately wonder if we're building our own houses at the expense of the house of God. Yes, this will at times feel risky because we will let go of something that feels both acceptable and good. But we are to “not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and our heavenly Father knows that we need them. But when we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, all these things will be given to us as well” (Matthew 6:31-33, paraphrase).

WHAT IF?

What if we really did this? What if we did this, not as individuals, but collectively, as a body? The collective nature of this work is not peripheral, it is essential. No doubt Haggai's audience, the people of Israel, were motivated to make the necessary sacrifices not just because God told them to, but because they all pitched in together. If just one of them sacrificed and engaged, that person's motivation would quickly wane. What would be the point? Why sacrifice their own paneled house if they weren't going to really make progress on the house of God? But when they all responded, the collective impact made individual sacrifices worth it.

The message of Scripture is not a message to go at it alone. The suffering that surrounds us is far too complex for anyone to attempt individualistic solutions. The message of Scripture is for collective impact. We are to work together, network together, and pool our resources and our gifts. As we do this, depth of impact and influence can be had. We must relationally engage others who are also engaged in this mission, so we are not only aware of our own gifts and resources, but also aware of the gifts, experiences, and insights from others. To do this is not easy. It is for this very reason that Haggai exhorted the people to “Be strong...and work” (Haggai 2:4). It's work. It's labor. It takes time, energy, and resources. There will be many seasons where we won't feel like doing it, but to neglect the work of God and miss the opportunity at hand is not just tragic. It's disobedient. It's denying the very thing we are called to. This is not a call to add a little volunteerism to our lives. This is a call to make our entire lives about God's house rather than our own “houses,” and in so doing, we will collectively bring about the kingdom of God.

THE RETURN OF CHRIST

The final words of Scripture are sobering...

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen. (Revelation 22:20-21)

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The time is short. “Yes, *I am coming soon,*” Christ tells us. Throughout this *Morph* experience we have highlighted many parables Jesus taught to describe and clarify the kingdom of God. One such collection of parables not only emphasizes the kingdom of God but also describes what it will be like when Christ returns. After hearing Jesus describe the coming destruction of the physical Temple, the disciples wanted to know “*when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?*” (Matthew 24:3). It is in this context that Jesus describes a man who returns from a journey.

Before leaving for the journey, the man...

...called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. (Matthew 25:14-15)

The man then left on his journey with the expectation that the servants would make good use of the gifts entrusted to them.

The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. (Matthew 25:16-18)

Upon his return, one might think that the master would be pleased with all three servants. None of them lost the money, after all. In the very least, he would get back what he had given. Such was not the case, though. He was pleased with the first two stating, “*You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:21). But when he came to the third, he was clearly displeased.

You wicked, lazy servant!... You should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:26-30)

So the return of Christ, the culmination of the expanding kingdom of God, will be as the return of this no-nonsense master. Talents and gifts are given, not to be buried, not to be protected, but to be used and invested for good. One might think that the third servant was being responsible. Yes, he was timid, but at least he didn’t lose it, or at least he didn’t invest in something evil. Nonetheless, he is called both *wicked* and *lazy*. Scripture does not commend the timid. Hear carefully the company of the cowardly.

But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death. (Revelation 21:8)

The *cowardly* are listed alongside “*the unbelieving, the vile, the murders, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars.*” We don’t think of cowardliness in this way. We think of cowardliness and timidity as people who are neutral, who don’t do any real harm. But that’s the problem. When you live in a world abounding with suffering, it’s wicked to be cowardly and do nothing. Scripture does not commend cowardliness, not only because it is a denial of our faith, but because it is a denial of love. We must not sit by and watch the world wallow in suffering while marching toward a Christ-less eternity, and then cower and disengage, and then claim to have the love of God. The love of God is displayed by those who step out, who engage, who roll up their sleeves, and then do something. They use the talents entrusted to them, and they labor and work to make a difference.

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MY PLAN

The Garden of Eden is behind us and the New Jerusalem is before us. We are somewhere between the two, and we are asked to be active participants in moving humanity from this existence to the next. We are not only a created people, but we are asked to be creators, to participate in the body of Christ and the astounding work he is currently doing.

So what do we do with this?

Most importantly, we do not leave this in the abstract. We are not passive observers. We are of those who, by grace, have discovered the satisfaction of our souls. No longer must we spend our lives rushing and racing from thing to thing in hopes of satisfying our deepest longings. We are free to love, free to serve, free to risk, and free to sacrifice.

Now is the time to act, and this action must not be haphazard. Scripture exhorts wisdom. The wise are those who not only have the heart to accomplish great things, but they thoughtfully craft a plan. Proverbs puts it like this.

It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way. (Proverbs 19:2)

How will you act? What is your next step? What will you do to not be consumed with your own “paneled house” but to maximize your impact for the house of God? This is no minor building project. Lives are at stake. When planning for high-stake efforts, wisdom weighs in.

Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance. (Proverbs 20:18)

Engage God. Engage the body of Christ. Engage this world for the world to come.

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