The background is a vibrant red color overlaid with a complex technical drawing in a lighter red or white. The drawing consists of various geometric shapes, including circles, rectangles, and lines, some of which are hatched. There are also some faint numbers and arrows scattered throughout the drawing, giving it the appearance of a mechanical blueprint or architectural plan. The overall aesthetic is industrial and technical.

RENOVATE

CHANGING WHO YOU ARE BY LOVING WHERE YOU ARE

**LÉONCE B.
CRUMP JR.**

Praise for *Renovate*

“Like me, Léonce Crump lives in a racially divided city. Churches in cities like that need help. Help has come in *Renovate*. It’s a groundbreaking book to help the church move past racial and socioeconomic divides in order to bring the gospel of Jesus to every person.”

—DR. DARRIN PATRICK, lead pastor of The Journey church in St. Louis and vice president of Acts 29, a global church planting network

“If you find yourself asking questions like ‘Why am I here?’ or ‘What is my purpose?’ or ‘Will my life count for anything?’, then look no further, this book is for you. Deep, theologically sound, thought provoking, yet delightfully readable and persuasively practical, *Renovate* will change the way you see yourself and the place, the literal place, where you live.”

—MICHAEL FLETCHER, senior pastor of Manna Church and leader, mPact Churches

“In our highly mobile world, we tend to think of where we live as just another stop along the way or, if we are lucky, the final stop on a lifelong journey to find the place that ‘fits’ us best. Léonce Crump challenges us to consider another paradigm, one that sees the community we live in and minister to as a place to which we’ve been sent with a calling—a calling to bring God’s agenda of redemption to every fabric of life. And when we do, it will change everything, not only about where we live but also who we are.”

—LARRY OSBORNE, author and pastor of North Coast Church in Vista, California

“*Renovate* is a timely disruption in a culture where our attraction to ‘progress’ can undermine our values and sense of community. With sound theology and urban sensibilities, Pastor Léonce calls into question our tendency to remain disconnected for mobility’s sake.

Readers will be inspired to view their current surroundings with new eyes, seeing a call for discipleship and renewal where they once saw only dead ends and dilapidation.”

—JUSTIN E. GIBONEY, founder of Crucifix and Politics

“Léonce’s voice is what our culture has been missing for a long time. This book demonstrates his unique ability to take very high and complex things and bring them to the street level. This book is a must have.”

—PROPAGANDA, Humble Beast Records

“*Renovate* is all about reclaiming a sense of place and a sense of putting down roots, and creating a 360-degree connectedness to the people and experiences within that place. I truly believe the human heart has a deep longing for that place called home both here in this life and in the life to come. Do yourself a favor. Read *Renovate* and reclaim your sense of place.”

—LINDA STANLEY, vice president and team leader
at Leadership Network

“With the creative genius of a theologian, the heart of a pastor, the tools of a sociologist, and the attitude of an activist, Léonce Crump has given the church a gift with *Renovate!* He’s a master storyteller; he paints a picture of cultural renewal through gospel that will inspire you. Warning: he drops gospel bombs on culture idols. Don’t be scared, though . . .”

—DERWIN GRAY, lead pastor at Transformation Church
and author of *The High Definition Leader: Building
Multiethnic Churches in a Multiethnic World*

“Léonce Crump has penned an important work grounded in theological, historical, and current social context. *Renovate* invites us to embrace communities beyond mere sentiment, platitude, or missional project. Indeed, authentic engagement of both neighbor and neighborhood is no longer optional but biblical; not only nice but

necessary to advancing a credible gospel witness in an increasingly diverse and secular society.”

—DR. MARK DEYMAZ, pastor of Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas and author of *re:MIX, Transitioning Your Church to Living Color*

“In a world where limitless mobility encourages many to constantly pursue the most advantageous option, Crump offers refreshing insight to a theology of place. His ministry in Atlanta and conviction to stay there sheds light on the much-needed conviction of permanent presence. *Renovate* appeals to all ranges of the lived experience, especially in today’s society.”

—STEPHEN UM, senior minister of Citylife Presbyterian Church of Boston and author of *Why Cities Matter*

“There’s a great deal of banter about changing the world. I’m guilty myself as I’ve also written a book about it. But Léonce Crump is onto something refreshing in *Renovate*. He reminds us of the significant, beautiful, and necessary calling of being faithful, steadfast, prayerful, and present right where we are. In other words, if you want to change the world, begin in your homes and families, pour into young people, get to know your neighbors, and seek the peace of your city.”

—EUGENE CHO, senior pastor at Quest Church, founder of One Day’s Wages, and author of *Overrated: Are We More in Love with the Idea of Changing the World Than Actually Changing the World?*

“Léonce’s new book is provoking yet winsome, smart yet accessible, and loaded with potential breakthroughs. While leading a multicultural movement has given me a platform to teach on the subject for years, I now realize I have much to learn still.”

—RYAN KWON, lead pastor of Resonate Church

“Jesus teaches that the central paradigm of the Christian life is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your

neighbor as yourself. Léonce Crump's *Renovate* provides a masterful framework for what Jesus's teaching on love looks like across the boundaries of race and class for the twenty-first century. American Protestantism has needed a book like this for the last fifty years."

—ANTHONY B. BRADLEY, PhD, associate professor of religious studies at the King's College in New York City

"Reading *Renovate* leaves you inspired and challenged to be engaged in the important work of shaping the culture through the gospel. Far too often we regulate Christianity to a Sunday-only encounter, while Crump invites us to join God's work on a daily basis and across the spectrums of life. This is truly a long-overdue call to the people of God to respond to the culture now. It is our time!"

—BRYAN CARTER, senior pastor at Concord Church

"Léonce Crump is a friend and fellow pastor. That also makes him a fellow traveler in our callings to be Christians, husbands, fathers, and pastors. Good fellow travelers teach you to walk the land with sure-footedness and deep-rootedness. They help you see the place you're in, the people you're around, and the possibilities for both. If you want to be better rooted where God has placed you with the people in your family and neighborhood, travel with Léonce in *Renovate*. These pages just might renovate your view of life and how you live it."

—THABITI M. ANYABWILE, pastor of Anacostia River Church

"Few leaders have the theological depth and cultural awareness to speak into the direction of believers in today's world. Not only does Léonce write with the insights of a sociologist; he draws them from personal experience. His writing isn't 'theory for'; it's tried and true testimony."

—LECRAE MOORE, Grammy Award-winning music artist

"Léonce is such a special gift to the church, and a needed one. I'm thankful for his leadership, teaching, and example!"

—JEFFERSON BETHKE, author of *It's Not What You Think*

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**LÉONCE B.
CRUMP JR.**



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RENOVATE

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*I dedicate this to my queen, Breanna.
Without you, Renovation Church, Renovate
the book, my entire ministerial life would not
exist. Aside from God, you are the hero of the
story. Everyone needs to know it. Thank you for
loving me with your whole heart. Thank you
for always believing in me. Thank you for
never wavering in your trust of Jesus.*

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them.
Start with what they know. Build with what they have.
But with the best leaders, when the work is done,
the task accomplished, the people will say
“We have done this ourselves.”

—Lao Tzu



Contents

Foreword by Matt Chandler	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	1
1 Why Are We Here?	11
2 The Way Home.	33
3 The Grand Tour.	61
Intermission—A Round-Table Discussion	77
4 A Theology of Place.	101
5 The Sanity of Sentness	135
6 The New Reality	175
Epilogue	193
Notes.	203



Foreword

Jesus is the King. He is the King over every earthly power and over every spiritual power. He is the one true sovereign to whom all will give an account. He and He alone can extend eternal grace and eternal judgment. Paul tells us “all things were created *through* him and *for* him.” Jesus is our loving shepherd and our friend. Jesus has promised to never leave us or forsake us. He will not orphan us. Jesus also sends us out to “make disciples of all nations,” teaching them to observe all He commanded. It is knowing that Jesus is King, that He loves us, and that He sends us out that should inform and drive the Christian life. This is where I found *Renovate* to be so helpful. The balance and synergy between these three truths as written by Léonce Crump should be helpful for all Christians regardless of their context.

To be fair, *Renovate* is written with a specific context in view. That context is Atlanta, Georgia. You will see in these pages Léonce’s love for this city. He is aware of its history, sociological makeup, and current realities. He hasn’t turned his eyes from its brokenness and wickedness, or from the complexities of the urban context. He does write as a man provoked like Paul

was in Athens. If you don't find yourself in an urban center or anywhere near Atlanta, there is still plenty to learn from the book in your hands. I pray that more Christians would pay close attention to where they live and minister, and would develop what Léonce calls a theology of place. There are some reasons this hasn't taken place. In my opinion, *Renovate* is spot on about sentness needing to be established among all Christians and not just those who feel called to vocational ministry. I couldn't help but smile as Léonce told stories and dreamed of ordinary church members feeling called into difficult neighborhoods and doing ministry for the long term in a given place. I also was reminded in a new and fresh way that Christians should think of their jobs in a specific way driven more by loving God and neighbor than it should ever be about making money or finding purpose in life.

Léonce will write quite a bit about transculturalism and the ethnic complexities that exist not just in Atlanta but where any sinful men and women dwell near each other. If you are an Anglo brother or sister, some of what he writes might rub you the wrong way and you may be tempted to disregard some of it. My experience with these types of conversations is that the posture of the Christian should be humility with a desire to understand. Your experience probably doesn't walk in step with Léonce's. But it would be a good thing to seek to understand how his experiences and losses have shaped him and how he sees the world around him today.

I have been friends with Léonce for quite a few years now, and I'm glad that the Lord sovereignly crossed our paths. I am eager to see what God accomplishes through his passion and unique gifting. I pray that the Spirit of God would shape, form, and renovate your heart toward Himself and your neighbor. Enjoy reading.

—MATT CHANDLER, pastor of The Village Church
and president of Acts 29 church planting network



Acknowledgments

There are no great men; just great teams that make incredible sacrifices so that the one whom they trust to lead them can get the credit. This is an indisputable fact, and one I feel especially as I consider what it has taken to produce this project. Sure, I wrote it, but it was the elders, leaders, and particularly the staff and community at Renovation Church who inspired it. They not only strive to live out these principles, but they are the test subjects who willingly allow me to try just about anything within reason to see our beautiful Atlanta more readily reflect God's glorious city to come. For this book, they let me step away from the day-to-day grind of leading to write about leading, and for that I am forever grateful. Ralph, Ethan, Copper, Pamela, Dawn, John, Vivian, Samuel, Justin, Leonard, Brian, John S., and Eric, thank you. I love my team. I love our church. I love Atlanta. Without all three, I'm just a man with a dream . . .

Additionally, thank you to my editor, John Blase. You kept me in the fight all the way to the finish line.



Introduction

Do you want your life, the lives of your family and friends, and the life of your community to reflect the glory of God? If your answer is no, then return this book immediately and try to get your money back. I'm not sure you can, but you should try, because you've obviously made a mistake. I'm sorry for your confusion, but these things happen, right? But if your answer is yes, even if you don't know what all that positive answer means or looks like, then I believe you've picked up the right book. And if the timing in your life is right, if your heart and mind are open enough to hear and wrestle with the things I want to share with you, then a powerful equation is in play.

the right words + the right time = CHANGE

That's right. Change. As in honest-to-goodness change. The study of family systems has shown us that when a person

changes, the entire family dynamic changes. That truth applies here too. So while we long for change in our communities and neighborhoods and churches and families, it is vital to remember that those changes begin on a very personal level, with each and every one of us. That's what we want, isn't it? For things to be different? We want things to change. *We* want to change. And not just for the sake of change, but for the better. For the good.

THE PROBLEM

I have learned that defining the problem at the outset is always wise. I'll elaborate on the problem and also the answer in the pages and chapters that follow, but for now allow me to simply name them. The obstacle standing in the way of our lives and our communities reflecting the glory of God is transience—defined by Random House Webster's as “1. not lasting, enduring, or permanent; transitory. 2. lasting only a short time; existing briefly; temporary.” The world we live in is one of almost limitless mobility. We can, physically and mentally, be almost anywhere in the world at any moment in time. This is truly an incredible time to be alive. But with all our advances in technology, I'm afraid something has been lost. Because of our now limitless mobility, the great majority of us have lost a sense of place that was inherent to previous generations. Sociologist Richard Florida writes,

First the railroad revolutionized trade and transport as never before. Then the telephone made everyone feel

connected and closer. The automobile was invented, then the airplane, and then the World Wide Web. . . . All of these technologies have carried the promise of a boundless world. They would free us from geography, allowing us to move out of the crowded cities and into lives of our own bucolic choosing. Forget the past, when cities and civilizations were confined to fertile soil, natural ports, or raw materials. In today's high-tech world, we are free to live wherever we want. Place, according to this increasingly popular view, is irrelevant.¹

It seems that, at least from the perspective of most, having a sense of place is antithetical to the postmodern buffet of limitless options and unfettered mobility. In other words, wherever I am right now is the most important place in the world. And wherever I will be next will replace it. But this has not always been the case. Prior to the many technological advances we enjoy, people were unable to move much farther than the place their families settled. Because of an inability to be as transient as we are now, there was a sense of responsibility and ownership, not only for the family unit, but—in the absolute broadest terms—for the very space the family occupied. The community was “ours,” and the contribution of each person mattered to the whole.

Today, however, we are free to move from place to place, enjoying the offerings and benefitting from each place's resources. But we rarely stay long enough to invest in its sustainability.

Richard Florida agrees: “We owe it to ourselves to think about the relationship between place and our economic future, as well as our personal happiness, in a more systematic—if different—way. . . . Maybe this seems so obvious that people overlook it. Finding the right place is as important as—if not more important than—finding the right job or partner.”²

I believe he is on to something. For our own good we must recapture a sense of place. What Professor Florida misses, though, is why it matters. Here’s what I mean. If my sense of place is only rooted in my personal happiness or economic future, then my sense of place is as fragile as my emotional state or the sense of stability and personal gain I derive from being economically, relationally, or even creatively secure. Experience tells us that all of these vacillate wildly, and with them so does our sense of place. The bottom line is this: if I am only connected to a community to the extent that it can sustain me, we have a parasitic relationship, and I will siphon its resources without regard to its well-being. In an impersonal sense, it affects the culture of the community. In a personal sense, it affects the people.

THE SOLUTION

There is another view though, one that takes into account the greater good and ultimately the glory of God. This is in complete contrast to transience; it is permanence or staying put. This view places value on people and the places they inhabit.

This view sees worth and meaning in the perspective we take in participating in the life of a community. This view pushes us to see ourselves as sent and not simply existing.

This book is about fleshing out this solution of permanence and developing a theology of place. At the same time, this thread of sentness runs through everything that is said here. They are dependent on one another; you simply cannot have one without the other. I'm not asking you to believe that fully at this early point, but I am asking you to consider it.

CONSIDER TIM AND BECKY

Consider my friends Tim and Becky, owners of Bearings Bike Shop. In 2008, around the same time my family and I moved to Atlanta, they moved from their suburban home into a downtown Atlanta neighborhood. Adair Park is a historic neighborhood in southwest Atlanta, one that has been left behind by the sweeping wave of gentrification. When sharing his story with me, Tim told me something that, judging by the incredible work they do there, I would have never guessed. He said, "We moved here looking for a cheap house on a wide street in the city. We had no desire to do anything but fix up our home and live our life." But soon after moving there, they began to notice the state of their community. In their own words: "As we began renovating our house, we would watch local gangs gather and fight in the neighborhood park. It became apparent that the park was virtually unusable by families. Violence, drugs, prostitution, and

crime dominated [our] neighborhood to the point where small children couldn't play on the playground.”

Then something incredible happened. They had a sort of awakening. They felt a stirring in their hearts like nothing they had ever experienced before, and in that moment they had a choice. Would they view this place as one to now flee, because it did not offer them the life of promise and personal happiness that so many other places would, or would they determine that the issues plaguing this small community were now *their* issues?

The Bearings Bike Shop's existence is living proof of the choice they made. When they realized they were not just selfishly or purposelessly existing in their neighborhood, everything changed. And though they had not grasped it when they first decided to move, what was happening had now become abundantly clear: God had sent them to Adair Park for the express purpose of being present so they could see the problems pervasive in their community, and, through seeing and experiencing them, develop a deep and rich sense of place.

By God's grace they have invested their lives toward a solution. For five years the Bearings Bike Shop has been an intersection between them and the children of Adair Park. Through their efforts, many of the gang fights have ceased, the children's education levels have risen, children in the neighborhood are taking responsibility for their home by picking up trash and reporting crime, and the adults—those who've moved in from

other suburban areas and those who've been there all of their lives—have taken notice. One revolutionary idea, seeing past themselves for the sake of the community, has helped to create a sense of ownership and place for nearly all their neighbors.

What is so gripping about Tim and Becky's story is that they didn't start out with the idea of turning the world upside down. In fact, they started out very much where most of us are: looking for the best opportunity to advance their own cause, to serve their own ends, and to make a life for themselves. But in a moment, everything changed. In a moment, they began to discover why they are where they are. They were *sent*.

AND CONSIDER ME

In April 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. penned his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Some fellow clergymen had been critical of his presence in Birmingham, calling his activities unwise and untimely. I've had the privilege of viewing some of Dr. King's original notes, scribbled across various pieces of paper—it was a surreal experience for me. Although the letter eloquently lays out several reasons for his presence there, the fundamental reason is summed up in this one thought: “I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. . . . Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”³ Presence itself—in the face of injustice—was a ministry worth his freedom.

My name is Léonce B. Crump Jr., and I am a pastor in the beautiful, broken heart of downtown Atlanta, Georgia. If you

want to know why I am here, I would echo Dr. King's words: because injustice is here.

Atlanta is well known for its trade, arts, creativity, and commerce. Some have even described it as “the New York of the South.” Even William Tecumseh Sherman, whose army burned Atlanta to the ground, ensuring Lincoln's reelection and ending Georgia's contribution to the Confederate war effort, upon returning to Atlanta several years later, said, in an interview with Clark Howell of the *Atlanta Constitution*: “When I got to Atlanta, what was left of the Confederacy could be roughly compared to your hand. Atlanta was the palm, and by destroying it I spared myself much further fighting. But remember, the same reason which caused me to destroy Atlanta will make it a great city in the future.”⁴

Sherman was correct. Atlanta is a great city. But while Atlanta is truly great on one level, on another level my city is clearly crumbling. Consider this: a recent undercover study found more than seventy-two hundred Georgia men sought to buy sex with a child in a one-month period. This is why Atlanta is ranked in the top five cities in America for sex trafficking. There are also more than twenty thousand homeless people in the city on any given day. Women and children make up 70 percent of that number. Fatherlessness, joblessness, poor educational institutions, drug addiction, violence, and orphaned children are just a few of the host of reasons why the heart of Atlanta is shattered. These and others could be summed up by the word *injustice*. And injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

That's why I came to Atlanta. And through much trial and difficulty, it's why I've remained. That's why I'm here.

And like Tim and Becky, I, too, was *sent*.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

One of my hopes is that this book causes you to stand in your community and ask yourself that same question: *Why am I here?* Perhaps, like me, it's because you have a clear view of some injustice that must be overturned. Perhaps it's simply a desire to do *good* in a world that is filled with unequal measures of lasting beauty and visible brokenness. I can assure you, though, there is a reason. You are not there by happenstance. You are there to be a part of God's solution, to meet the need around you. Whether you're aware of the need that surrounds you is another matter. But if you're not, then maybe I can remind you of some biblical truths, share some flesh-and-blood stories, and ask some hard but ultimately answerable questions about what is known as the "ministry of presence." Without these truths and stories and questions, you'll have no context for asking yourself that important question or for pushing yourself to see what lies beneath the accepted narrative of your city or town or place.

And as we'll see, context is everything.

One last word before we begin. The subtitle to this book is *Changing Who You Are by Loving Where You Are*. As you consider and ask questions here, I hope the answers you find are disruptive. I hope the answers you find will cause you to wrestle

with some long-held ideas. Ultimately I hope those answers stretch your eyes and mind and heart to the breaking point and beyond, for only to the extent that we ourselves are broken can the love of God sweep in and fill us with a desperate love for the people who surround us and the towns and cities in which we live. Until that happens, we are only noisy and clanging (1 Corinthians 13). Truly, without love we are nothing.



Why Are We Here?

Directions are instructions given to explain how.
Direction is a vision offered to explain why.

—Simon Sinek

This book is essentially a renovation project, and as with any such project, it is essential to start with the foundation. Is it sound? Does it need repair in any way? Bypassing the foundation only leads to headache later, so that's where we're going to begin—the foundation. Answering the question “Why are we here?” is our foundation. Discovering God's true purposes for the world He created and our role in it is our foundation. Upon this foundation we will build every other idea presented and hopefully build a holy confidence in you that empowers you to believe that what you are doing, right where you are, right now, matters. There will be some lofty proposals that may disturb what you've always felt to be true, and I certainly won't be able to cover every potential objection exhaustively. My hope, though,

is that as you grapple with the possibility that our most common understanding of the phrase “Jesus came to save the world” may be truncated or misguided is that you would do so by first running to the Scriptures and nowhere else to determine whether what is being written here is true or whether I’ve simply lost my mind. So are you ready? Really ready? Okay then, here we go.

Heaven is not our ultimate hope. Yes, you read that correctly. To take heaven as our ultimate hope, believing that in the end God will simply wipe away the world and start over, has far-reaching effects. Our belief may subconsciously stunt the way we live life and do ministry. Even the difficulty many have with investing long-term in a place, to see a ministry effort through to its end, is connected to our view of what God will do with this world. If you believe our ultimate hope is in heaven, I must ask, what if you’re wrong?

FOR GOD SO LOVED *THIS* WORLD

Jesus came to save the world—what an incredibly pregnant phrase, a phrase familiar to most every follower of Jesus. Jesus came not to condemn the world, nor judge the world, but *to save* the world. He says as much throughout the Gospels. He says it with force in His emotion-filled soliloquy at the end of John’s narrative, in chapter 12.

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone

hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but *to save the world*. (verses 46–47)

This phrase captures the thrust of His intentions. It is reflective of God’s desires described amid many illustrative statements at the close of His public ministry, and we must consider it with new eyes if we are ever to understand what it means to be fully present in a place, as opposed to transient, and what it means to do ministry in this world, the only world we have.

So I ask a simple but complex question:

How is it that you view this world?

I ask this first because it is fundamental to our discussion. How we view God’s world matters with respect to how we treat God’s world and how we see ourselves in it. I ask, second, because for centuries we’ve been taught there is a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, between that which is of the world and that which is not. This is a sort of Christianized Gnosticism that treats this material world as inherently bad and our being in Christ as purely spiritual, which in turn leaves us completely detached from this world. The unfortunate consequence of this perspective is that many of us have been taught, and therefore believe, that we are pitted against the world as enemies—and if not enemies, then neutral participants—rather than postured toward this world as what I call “redemptive

agents.” On a more serious front, this has led to an escapism mentality when it comes to the world; namely, we are separate from it and therefore must survive it until we are relieved.

A SILLY GOSPEL

In sillier forms this mentality has led to Christianized interpretations of otherwise normal activities. What, for instance, is *Christian* aerobics or, more controversially, *Christian* hip-hop? The church has created an entire subculture rooted in this sacred/secular divide, which has more to do with separating us from the world than it does with God’s intentions for the world. I realize there is nuance here, but in our fear of being too *of* this world, we are all too often not really *in* it either, but merely *on* it, taking up space. Songs and sermons have been written to remind us to the idea that this world is not our home. In one sense, this is true. This world, as it is, is not our home. But have we, in much of our understanding, taken this and created a false dichotomy? According to Scripture it certainly seems we have, and knowing this should make us ask some penetrating questions, such as “Why would we live detached from what Jesus came to save?” and “Why would we believe to be inherently evil (the world) what God once called very good?” In good conscience and right submission to God’s Word, we can’t. The world is not inherently evil; it wasn’t created that way. It has been infected with a disease called sin. This infection was initiated by satanic lies and ratified by the covenant-breaking

actions of the first family. The world was made good, and God so loves His world, why would He abandon it?

Here's one way to conceptualize this idea, particularly if you are married or desire to be. Imagine your spouse is suddenly infected with a disease, though it is their own fault that they are infected. They wandered into a quarantined area for no good reason other than they wanted to, and they have now contracted a life-threatening illness. Would you revile them or seek to redeem them? Would you desire to heal them or have them die? Would you desire to save them or see them destroyed? Unless you lack an ounce of humanity, we both know the answer to those questions. How much more, then, would God, in His infinite and unalterable perfection and love, long to keep His covenant with creation, eradicate the disease of sin, and restore His creative work? God wants to win the world, not destroy it! God's ultimate desire is to restore the world, not wipe it away. This world is not an evil place needing to be escaped from, but an infected place needing to be renewed, to be restored, to be renovated. Make no mistake, these are competing worldviews. The escapist route is best captured by that word I've mentioned a few times already—*transience*—which may be the ministry problem, if not life problem, of our time. The renovating route evokes words like *perseverance*, *faithfulness*, *long-suffering*, *staying put*.

This is the narrative of the Scriptures—God's continued revelation of His covenant relationship with humanity and

creation. What we have, then, in Jesus repeatedly declaring that He came to save the world rather than rid God of it is so rich with meaning that we must embrace it, not only for how it affects our view of our future, but for how it impacts the way we live now, where we live now, and what we do day-to-day in our present reality.

BACKWARD UNDERSTANDING

You've probably heard some variation of the quote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." The source is the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, and his point was that clarity for our lives forward lies in looking to the past. That's how it works here, as we look back to the very beginning. The Scriptures open with a dramatic tone. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1–2). If you are a Christian, then you have likely read these words, perhaps many times. You have more than likely taken them as a simple account of what took place when the world was made. But what if I told you that these few words, and what follows for the next two chapters, are revealing for us far more than just a simple narrative of God's creating everything from nothing? What if I told you that what is being revealed to us in actuality is God covenantally binding Himself not only to humanity but to the full breadth of His creation? But what does that mean, exactly?

A covenant, in brief, was a typical way of describing a relationship bound by promises and obligations. The word *covenant* can be found 286 times in the Old Testament and is a common feature of the ancient world, particularly in Middle Eastern cultures. When Moses writes that God created the heavens and the earth, what he is shaping immediately for the reader is that God was establishing a covenantal relationship with His world. What comes next is familiar to most. After these substantial opening words, God begins to create, and with nearly everything He creates, He immediately calls it good. The Scriptures record an almost rhythmic continuation of just that—He creates, He calls it good. In this we see the declaration of God’s unchanging covenant with the totality of His creation. Everything He made, He sustains. And everything He made is meant to obey Him. Everything is bound covenantally to God (see Psalm 145).

All things, plants, animals, and persons are appointed to be covenant servants, to obey God’s law, and be instruments . . . of His gracious purpose.

—John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*

While that quote is true, there is a nuance when it comes to “persons.” Among all the things God created, humanity is different. Human beings are the one creature created, called, and empowered to bear God’s image within the rest of His creation.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26–28)

Human beings were created to mediate the rule of God to His world. We were given stewardship over everything, trusted with everything. A failure to be faithful to God on our part affects all of creation. We were made accountable to our Creator for His cosmos, His world.

To miss humanity’s unique calling in this world would be to miss the very purpose of our being made in God’s image.

You see, this understanding only comes by looking back. But this has to leave us wondering, where is the disconnect between what God intended and the world in which we presently exist? In other words, what happened?

SO WHAT HAPPENED?

God created all things, and after each successive creative eruption, He deemed it good. After He made humanity, He looked over everything with the admiration of an overjoyed father and deemed it all “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Then a shift occurs. What Moses records following this series of creative events is tragic. Even those unfamiliar with the Bible know the unfortunate end of the first family, and with it the decline of “very good” into disorder and decay.

The Fall. This phrase has come to be the common nomenclature used to describe the events of Genesis 3, a familiar but often diminished incident in history. Though the phrasing grabs our attention, it is far from adequate in describing the utter violation of God’s goodness that subsequently brought fracture and discord into God’s creation. It is inadequate in describing the devastating infection unleashed on creation that followed Adam and Eve’s terrible decision.

The full account of humanity’s creation is unpacked in Genesis 2. After God created the man, He gave him a job, to work and keep his new, perfect home. This was a beautiful beginning. We don’t have a time line of this period. We don’t

know how long it lasted or how often God engaged with Adam, but what we read in Genesis 3:8 smacks of familiarity. God is described there as “walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” This is written as though it were a common occurrence. God is personal. There is clearly a rich relationship present between the Father and Adam. Within the bounds of this relationship—the relational dynamic of covenant is vitally important—the Father says to Adam, and Adam alone, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (2:16–17). This was the command. It was clear. Periodically I’ve wondered to myself, why? Why create a tree that could cause such havoc? But I know I am asking the wrong question. It is not about the tree, but what the tree represented.

It was not the nature of the tree that made it dangerous . . . but what it stood for: obedience to the word of God.

—Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse Is Found*

The tree itself is inconsequential. What’s in view is whether this man, created in God’s image, endowed with God’s love, and granted stewardship of God’s rule, would trust God’s word. It’s the exact same struggle all human beings have today. Will we trust God and take Him at His word, or will we trust ourselves

and elevate our word over His? Adam's, and subsequently Eve's, answer to that question is all too clear. The ramifications were far-reaching, affecting every aspect of creation and spreading through every generation since them.

Lucifer. The Evil One. Satan. Historically feared, maligned, or made into a playful character, he enters the narrative of Genesis 3 in the form of a serpent, as the voice of reasonable deception. Yes, reasonable deception. He approaches Eve subtly and seemingly without ill intent. Adam is not engaged. The serpent begins his innocent inquiry by simply asking, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (verse 1). This is not threatening at first, but is presented as confusion on his part. Perhaps one unfamiliar with the narrative may think he simply misunderstood the command of God. But this was no misunderstanding. This was a coy attempt at dishonoring their Father and inciting rebellion. Eve, having been instructed at some point by Adam as to what God said, responded as if correcting Lucifer's confusion, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (verses 2–3).

There is clarity in her response, though minor variations exist in what she says compared to what God commanded Adam. Though it could be perceived that she sees God's instructions as open to human interpretation, at the very least she understands the consequences of rebellion. She knows the

ultimate end of choosing wrongly. But the serpent's insistent persuasion doesn't relent at her gentle rebuke. His motives are immediately made clear: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (verses 4–5). The trap was set, the seed sown, rebellion imminent, as the woman suddenly believed a lie. Actually she believed *the* lie, the same one we believe every time we rebel against God's goodness. God must be hiding something from me. God must not have my best interest in mind. God. Is. Not. Good.

THE ALMOST UNDOING OF EVERYTHING

It happens so swiftly that one must read and reread to try to grasp the moment that the woman forsook her relational covenant with God, her calling to steward His rule, her imaging Him in perfection, for some false notion that she could be a better god than God. All the while you must wonder, "What is Adam doing right now?" The original command came to him, did it not? He was made first, was he not? Why would he not, in this moment, step between the serpent and his wife and mediate the mistake that was about to unravel their covenant relationship with God? Perhaps this question is unanswerable, but what we do know is he not only allowed her to be deceived, but he took the deception from her hands, following instead of leading, partaking in death right along with her. "She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6).

In a single moment, everything God intended is *seemingly* undone. God's relational covenant with humanity is violated. Humanity's stewardship over the whole of creation is distorted. Humanity's capacity to adequately image God is marred. Everything God previously marveled over and called very good immediately began to experience the consequences of Adam and Eve's decision to willfully violate the Word of God and believe the lie of the Evil One.

Our first parents being left to the freedom of their own will, through the temptation of Satan, transgressed the commandment of God in eating the forbidden fruit; and thereby fell from the estate of innocence wherein they were created.

—Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 21

This was a complete flight from God. Their rebellion invited discord, alienation, and the covenant curse of guilt and death. The narrative then shifts from the conception of rebellion to God's response. God, walking in the garden as He seemingly did with regularity, calls out to Adam, "Where are you?" (verse 9). They were hiding. God is God. His question is not one of location but an almost rhetorical question of spiritual and relational state. He knew what they'd done. They'd never hidden before. Their relationship just experienced a decisive shift. Notice he calls for the man. Why? Because it was to the man that the covenant command was handed down. It was

with the man that the covenant relationship was initiated. And ultimately it is the man, God's first son, who is responsible for what has taken place.

DIVINE HEARTBREAK

Upon God's call, the man responds. He is naked and afraid, he tells God. God inquires, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11). Again God inquires, not because He lacks the knowledge, but because He is engaging the fracture of their spiritual and emotional state, of their relationship with Him, and of His creation. In response to God's question, they begin blame shifting. It's a common trait that has been handed down to us from the first couple. Adam blames his wife. Eve blames the serpent. God looks on with heartbreak and disgust.

I've often imagined this moment. Painful? Filled with regret? A mix of varying emotions? We often characterize God as distant, as though He doesn't feel. Yet the Scriptures are replete with moments where God expresses deep emotions. We are made in His image after all, however marred it might now be. Where do you think our emotions come from?

God feels:

Anger | Psalm 7:11

Compassion | Lamentations 3:22

Grief | Genesis 6:6

Love | 1 John 4:8

Hate | Proverbs 6:16

Jealousy | Nahum 1:2

Joy | Zephaniah 3:17

Pleasure | Psalm 149:4

Pity | Judges 2:18

I only share this so that you understand that what took place was not some impersonal breaking of God's law but a very personal violation of God's love. We need to have that as the context to understand what happens next.

God, in response to their rebellion, imposes several curses on all involved in this covenant-breaking revolt. His righteous anger was turned on the Evil One first, no doubt leaving the two made in His image to wonder what exactly would be their fate. He curses the serpent to spend forever writhing along the ground, lower than any other created thing. God turns to the woman, promising pain in childbirth and a constant sense of inadequacy that would cause her to long after her husband's role. She would not, unless something dramatically altered the course of human history, ever experience the co-equal but role-designated dominion over the earth that God granted them in Genesis 1:26–28.

God then finally turns to the man, His first made. He rebukes him for submitting to the voice of his wife rather than the command of God. He reminds Adam of His covenant, not only with humanity, but all of creation. God reminds Adam of his role to steward God's rule in the world and the subsequent

effects of His rebellion: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17–19).

You must ask yourself why. Why is the ground itself cursed because of Adam’s revolt? When Adam violated his covenant with the Father, everything under his stewardship violated it as well. The consequences, then, extended to every aspect of God’s creation. The world would now be experienced as an inhospitable place, human dominion challenged at every turn. Work becomes toilsome instead of joyous. Adam’s rebellion shattered the harmony in which God’s creation, His entire creation, previously existed. The apostle Paul tells us that the world groans under the weight of sin, though the material universe did not bring that groaning upon itself (Romans 8:20–22). Even the Old Testament prophet Hosea sees the connection between humanity’s response to God and the health of the rest of creation.

There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and
 committing adultery;
 they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows
 bloodshed.

Therefore the land mourns,
 and all who dwell in it languish,

and also the beasts of the field
 and the birds of the heavens,
 and even the fish of the sea are taken away. (4:2–3)

The scope of Adam's revolt undeniably includes the entire planet.

GOD DIDN'T RUN

God could have washed His hands, started over, pulled the transient card, walked away, and left things as they were: a sin-sick people inhabiting a sin-sickened world. But God is too good for that. He is too kind. Through one man came death (Romans 5:12), but through another man would come the renovation of all that was broken. Through the second Adam would come life (verse 17).

Found within the words of the curse that God imposed on the serpent is a sliver of *hope*. You could miss it easily if you're not attentive to the character of God or the words being spoken. After God curses the serpent to its lowly existence, He speaks to that which inhabits the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). God's hostility is directed to the serpent, not the man, not the woman, and not His creation. His war is not against the world He made but against the serpent, against sin and death, against disobedience and rebellion, against

anything that would try to threaten His rule. There are essentially two antithetical kingdoms set against each other because of the infection called sin that entered God's world. And God would not lose what is His.

But what, you may wonder, is hopeful in these words? Martin Luther called Genesis 3:15 the *proto-euangelion*—the first gospel. In these words of war, God also declares hope and good news that can only point to the One to come. God announces to the serpent that the woman will be his enemy. She will not follow after him. God will have her as His own, and God will have a people through her as His own. Though they revolted, God will redeem them. This is the extent of the jealously renovating love of God.

In this first gospel, God doesn't stop at announcing this enmity between the woman and the serpent. God is making promises, the greatest of which is that One is coming who will right this grave injustice and alter the course of human history. The He spoken of here is the coming Messiah, Jesus. He will be the One to secure the promises God made. He will be the One who will ultimately crush the head of the serpent and reclaim for the Father all that belongs to Him.

A GRACE-FULL TRANSITION

This moment of transition from curse to grace is paramount. In opposition to a spirit of transience, God is committing to permanence, ensuring the future of humanity and, with it, all

of creation. The narrative ends with two beautiful reflections of God's covenant promise being kept. First, understanding, it seems, what has just taken place in God's war/hope declaration, Adam names his wife. Until this moment she had simply been referred to as "the woman." Now that God has secured for her and her offspring a future free from becoming like the serpent, and promised to form a people for Himself from all people, Adam gives her a name meaning "life" and "mother of all" (verse 20). Second, we see God in a glorious act of grace make the first atoning sacrifice in Scripture, and with the skins of that sacrifice, He covered the nakedness of His two children. He covered their sin in the sense that their knowing their nakedness was a direct result of their rebellion. This is grace. This is hope. This is God's securing what is His and making plain that nothing would stop His intentions. This is the beginning of His great redemption. God did not give up on His world, nor did He give up on His stewards, namely, humanity. God desired a renovation of what once was, and so throughout Genesis we see God seek a renewal of His original covenant: first with Noah, then with Abraham, and then with Israel, and this extends down the generational lines through Jesus to you and me. We are now called, through God's renewed covenant in Christ, to be mediators of His renovation of the entire world. Where Adam and Eve failed, in Christ, we have hope to succeed.

That is why we are here.



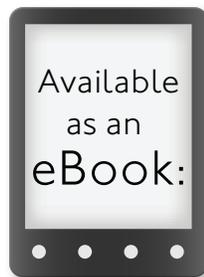
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