



# The Story Of Salvation

## NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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### **32. The Plan of God**

When we reached the end of the Old Testament section of this survey of salvation history, we took an overview of the purposes of God up to that point (study 18). Now we do this again, looking particularly to the epistles in the New Testament to see what they show us about the plan of God. What we see is that there is an *unfolding revelation* through salvation history of what God is doing. Every stage and step is *consistent* with what has gone before, but it is *not always obvious* or *predictable* as to what is to come next; in fact it is true that at times only when the fulfilment comes can we see what was in the promise.<sup>1</sup> God our Saviour is the God who surprises us with the twists and turns of His plan, but who never contradicts Himself in those surprises.

<sup>8</sup> For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. <sup>9</sup> As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. <sup>10</sup> As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, <sup>11</sup> so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:8-11)

So, in the New Testament epistles we find *new* elements to the revelation of God’s plan in history, which have been brought to light by the revelation that has come in Jesus Christ, but each of these elements is consistent with all that God has been doing up to this point.

The letter of Paul to the Ephesians gives perhaps the fullest outlines of the plan of God in the whole of the Bible. Paul here uses another word when speaking of this plan, the Greek word *musterion*, “mystery” (see 1:9-10; 3:2-13). A mystery is a secret, whose meaning is closed off to those who are outside but is open to those who are inside. What defines those who are “inside” or “outside” is not achievement or initiation rite, but faith in Christ who has justified us by his blood and who gives us the gift of the Spirit.

#### **Ephesians 1:3-23**

The first focus of this chapter is that the whole of God’s salvation plan (which is here spelled out in his intention to bless us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm – v. 3) is focussed in what He has done in Jesus Christ. Right through the whole section the most repeated phrase is “in Christ” or “in him”. *Nothing* that God the Father has done in the *whole* scope of salvation history has been without Jesus Christ in view. Jesus is no “plan B” in the schemes of God, something that He has resorted to when previous attempts had failed. This tells us a lot about the Old Testament history, and Israel’s many failures: it was all to prepare for and to point to Jesus Christ. These failures did not take God by surprise nor did they “disappoint” Him. All of Israel’s sinning, while not desired by Him, was provided for and dealt with beforehand in His plan.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the death and the resurrection of the Messiah was not expected by anyone in Israel, but after Christ’s coming, death and resurrection, the Old Testament can be seen to be looking forward to it.

Paul teaches that the choice of God to save us in Christ happened *before the creation of the world* (v. 4). In fact, creation came to be through Christ and for Christ, and is held together in Christ (Col. 1:16-17). And history's goal was always going to be reached through Jesus Christ. We were never destined to have a holiness and blamelessness of our own, but only in Christ. We were never going to enter the fullness of relationship with Him as sons and daughters except as we shared in Christ's relationship with Him (v. 5). All of this was so that at the end the whole of creation would stand in praise and awe of God Himself that He brought things to their glorious conclusion simply by the glory of His own grace, freely expressed in the sending of His own Son (v. 6). The plan was worked out through the shedding of the blood of Christ in an atoning sacrifice that redeemed us from our sins, bringing us forgiveness (vv. 7-8).

All of this is with a view to the final "great reconciliation", the bringing together of all things in unity under one head at the very end of all things, even Christ Jesus (vv. 9-10). God's great intention and plan is for the universal unity of all things. This is a new thing made clear to the church (those who have believed in Christ) in a way that was not so clear to Israel. Paul makes this clear when he says, "And he made known to us the mystery of his will..." This will is the secret plan made public in Christ that Jews and Gentiles will be co-equal partakers in the kingdom of God through faith in Christ. What Paul seems to be saying in these verses is that the whole unity of creation hangs on the reconciliation of humanity to God and to one another through Christ's redeeming sacrifice. When God created the church through Christ's death, He established the first fruits of the future for the whole of creation. The place of the church in the plan of God really is quite enormous!

[This means too that the unity of God's people is a foretaste of eternity. This unity is not simply homogeneity (sameness) and it is not the denial of difference in a bland kind of "lowest common denominator" Christianity or totalitarian cultural dominance. It is the unity of love, the unity of preferring the needs of others ahead of our own, the unity of serving rather than being served. It is unity in which the differences of each other are received as the gift of God for us to find the way of love. If each were the same as the other, what would love involve or mean? It is our differing that makes love dynamic. It means that our giving to another is truly a giving of something that they could not have any other way; it means that what we receive from another we receive as an indispensable gift that we ourselves could never provide or gather. When we are called to love our neighbour, we are not called to love ourselves!]

In verses 11-14 Paul uses the language of "we" and "you" to show that Jews and Gentiles are included together in this plan, and that the gift of the Holy Spirit to both through faith in the gospel is the sign and seal of this unity. Later, in chapter 2:11-22, Paul speaks to Gentile believers (the majority of the church in Ephesus) and shows them the following:

- Before the coming of Christ, the Gentiles were outside the saving action of God: separate, excluded, foreigners, without hope, without God. Gentiles must never forget the place of Israel in the plan of God, and know with thankfulness that their inclusion in the covenant is by grace, grace alone. See also Romans 9-11.
- God the Father has brought Gentiles near through the blood of Christ.
- Jesus is, by virtue of his death for all sinners, Jewish or Gentile, now our peace. Peace is not primarily individual internal quietude, but rather good communal relationship.

- This peace is established by the abolition of the Law's condemnation through Christ's death. Estrangement from God is at the heart of our estrangement from one another. Where this estrangement is dealt with through a reconciling atonement by which we are justified, then peace is established between people. (This ties in with Bonhoeffer's insight that we are never to relate to one another directly, but only through Christ.<sup>2</sup>)
- In his sacrificial death Jesus has brought the two into one: he himself is the grounds of the unified human race. The cross did not simply meld Gentiles onto a Jewish structure. By his ending of the law by his atoning death, Jesus became the seed of a new humanity in which Jews and Gentiles have an equal share. "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."
- So, Gentile believers are no longer separate, excluded, foreigners, aliens to God's great future. Rather they are fellow members of this community.

Paul then prays for those who believe in Christ (vv. 15ff), that the Father will give revelation and wisdom by the Spirit so that we may know the Father better (v. 17), and so that we may know the hope to which He has called us in Christ (v. 18). This inheritance is linked to the outworking of incomparably great power, the same power that was at work when He raised Christ from the dead (vv. 19-20). He is saying that the plan of God is that we will inherit all that His risen Son has inherited, and all the power that He exerted to ensure Christ inherited is now at work to ensure that we inherit. This is great grace! Christ has been raised from the dead and seated at the Father's right hand in heaven, and so shares in the Father's reign, bringing creation to its intended goal. Every power and authority and rule and dominion in all history must submit to him (v. 21)—and so all evil is shown to be defeated by Christ through the cross (Col. 2:14-15, Heb 2:14-15), and will be seen to be so defeated at the fullness of times. Currently everything is under the feet of Christ (v. 22)—i.e. defeated and in necessary submission to him, like a defeated general of an army before the throne of his conquering king—and in that rule Christ is now head over all things *for the church*, to which he is so closely bound and united that it is his body, and is his fullness (v. 23).

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<sup>2</sup> Community, for the Christian, centres in Jesus Christ. This means three things:

- (1) a Christian is related to others because of Jesus Christ;
- (2) the path to others is only through Jesus Christ;
- (3) the Christian is elected in Christ from eternity to eternity.

The first point of being relates to one's need of others. Christians must have one another to give God's word reciprocally to each other. The word given to me is more assuring than my own. Yet my word may encourage another who is uncertain of his own heart. Thus the Christian community is to bring the message of salvation to all. The second point means that all relationships with one another and God are through Christ. He is our peace, wrote St. Paul, and the avenues to others wind through him. The third point relates to the Incarnation. We are incorporated into Christ and shall be with him and one another in an eternal fellowship.