

4 + 5.

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

LESSON 4 + 5 TEXT HANDOUT

WHEN WAS THE BIBLE WRITTEN?

The Bible is a book made of 66 smaller books. Over 40 different writers wrote these smaller books--men who lived in different nations, spoke different languages, and had such diverse occupations as kings, priests, fishermen, and farmers. These men lived between about 1450 B. C. and 100 A.D., thus being separated by some 1500 years. And the subjects on which they wrote were diverse: some wrote books of history, others books of poetry, some books of law or prophecy, and still others letters to groups or individuals. Since 39 of these books relate to the period of time before the coming of Christ and deal primarily with God's covenant with Israel, they are called the Old Testament. These writings were collected and put together by the Jews. These were collected as one book by at least 200 B. C. because about that time they were translated into the Greek language in what is called the Septuagint.

The other 27 books tell of the life of Jesus and how the message He gave was spread throughout the world. Since Jesus brought a new covenant, these are called the New Testament. These writings were sent to individuals or to groups of Christians who, through copies, shared them with other Christians. By about 300 A.D., Christians had collected sets of the entire 27 books and had put them with the 39 Old Testament books. Three such collections dating to the 4th century still exist:

- Codex Vaticanus (325 A.D.) containing nearly all of the Bible
- Codex Sinaiticus (350 A.D.) containing almost all of the New Testament and over half of the Old Testament
- Codex Alexandrinus (400 A.D.) containing almost the entire Bible

That 66 such seemingly diverse documents would be collected into a single book is unusual. But what is even more amazing is that when they are put together, they form a unified whole. They tell a single story of God's creation and His plan for human beings. Only those writing the last of the books could have had any understanding of how all these would fit together. It is almost as if 40 people were told to make 66 pieces for a jig-saw puzzle while knowing little of what the others were making. Then, when all the pieces were put together, they fit perfectly.

HOW COULD THESE BOOKS TELL A SINGLE STORY WHEN WRITTEN BY SO MANY PEOPLE SO WIDELY SEPARATED IN TIME, PLACE, AND CIRCUMSTANCES?

When the many pieces of an automobile, so different from each other and manufactured in different places, are brought together on an assembly line, there is a perfect match. How is it possible? Obviously they were all part a single design. And so it is with scripture. The marvelous unity of scripture

is possible only because behind all of the writing was a common designer, the Holy Spirit, who was guiding each person in what he wrote.

BUT WHAT IS THE COMMON THREAD RUNNING THROUGH THESE BOOKS?

The common thread is that God creates humans who, after a time, rebel against Him, and He wants to bring them back. Each book in the Bible contributes something to telling this story. To study the Bible well, we must know the basic elements of this story so we can fit what each book of the Bible says into its common theme.

THE STORY OF GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN CAN BE OUTLINED IN TEN STEPS

We may think of the story of scripture in ten steps which tell the essence of the story of God and human beings. These ten steps outline the plan of God for the redemption of man. Each of these ten steps is given below with a simple drawing to make it easy to remember.

1. God created us in fellowship/relationship with Him.

The first people God made were Adam and Eve. They lived in close fellowship with God who “walked” with them in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). Their relationship was close and happy. As each new person comes into the world, he or she also begins in this same close and happy relationship with God. All that God creates is good and when each person begins life, the fellowship with God is close.

2. God gave us the power to choose.

While all of God’s creation glorifies Him--the heavens, the mountains, the seas, the animals, the birds, and human beings--God gave only to humans the power to make choices. He said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). To humans alone God gave an immortal soul--this meant not only that humans had a spirit which would live forever, but also that they are accountable to God for their decisions. To the first man and woman, God said, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). They could choose to do as God said and have plenty to eat or they could choose to disobey God and eat of the forbidden tree. “To eat or not to eat” of that tree was the question, and the choice.

All humans who have lived since Adam and Eve have faced a similar choice. While our choice is not whether to eat of a particular tree, we, likewise, have things God says we may and may not do. That God gave humans a soul, responsibility, and choice defines our nature. We are not like animals, who operate from instinct. We have the capacity to decide whether we will do what God has directed or rebel against Him.

3. All have chosen to sin.

Through the influence of Satan, Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit and gave to her husband, Adam, who also ate of it (Genesis 3:6). They exercised choice, choosing to sin. Each human following them, who has lived to be old enough to be responsible for his own actions, has also chosen sin. This is Paul’s very point in the first three chapters of Romans. There he explains that Gentiles, without a specific law but with a general understanding of what is right and wrong, chose to sin. The Jews, likewise, with the guidance of specific details in a law, also chose sin. Paul concludes, “for all have

sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Each one of us can look at his/her life and see that this statement is true of us. We have all sinned.

4. Our sins separate us from God bringing spiritual death.

Choices have consequences and the choice of sin brings devastating consequences. Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2). Paul said, “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). When Adam and Eve chose sin, they were driven from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23). Thus, humans were banished from the tree of life. They were now subject to physical death, and, in addition, were banished from the presence of God. This means they were now subject to spiritual death, eternal separation from Him. Often this is referred to as “the fall of man.”

Some have misunderstood this fall, however, thinking it means that humans are “depraved,” that is, that their nature is basically flawed, that they cannot help but sin. If this were the case, we would not be responsible for sinning and God could not hold us accountable. We do not, then, have a “sinful nature.” God has given us desires which can be fulfilled in both good ways and bad ways. When we choose the bad ways, we sin. The fall of Adam and Eve brought physical death to all of us (Romans 5:12), but we are separated from God by our own sins. While it is true that the spread of sin in the world presents us now with a dazzling array of ways to sin, perhaps making temptations more difficult, we still make our own choices and are responsible for them.

The choice to sin brought vast consequences. It brought physical death into the world along with the various diseases that bring death. It brought pain and suffering, and made producing food more difficult (Genesis 3:16-19). The answer to why these problems are in the world is that sin is in the world. The consequences of sin hit hardest at the ones who commit the sin--one is separated from God by his own sins (Ezekiel 18:20). But the nature of sin is such that innocent people are often hurt as well. Adam and Eve, for example, brought physical death to all their descendents. Lying and stealing separate those who do it from God, but also hurt those who receive the lying and stealing.

The answer to most deep questions, then, is that God gave humans the power to choose and their bad choices have brought very serious consequences to them and to many others.

5. God must punish but wants to forgive.

We are separated from God by our sins. God does not want to leave it this way. He loves us and wants to be in a close relationship with us. Since He is merciful, he wants to forgive us of our sins and bring us close to Him. Yet, God is also just. His justice says that sins must be punished. Just as we do not believe it is right for a judge to free a convicted criminal without punishment, so God cannot ignore our sins. He cannot let us come back to fellowship with Him without our sins being punished but the punishment for our sins is eternal separation from Him. Thus the dilemma: shall God punish or forgive?

God must punish us, but He wants to forgive us. God “is not wanting any to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). So how can God be both just and merciful? This is the great dilemma of all time. God must punish; God wants to forgive. Is there a way for Him to do both?

The greatest good news of all time is that God found a way to be both just and merciful. He is both “just and justifier” (Romans 3:26). He must punish our sins, and will do so, and yet he can also let us go free. How is this possible?

6. God sent Jesus as our punishment.

Jesus came from heaven to become a human being like us. He was tempted like we are, yet He never sinned. This sinless man, however, was punished as a sinner. For saying He was the Son of God, the Jews condemned Him as a blasphemer--worthy of death. For saying He was a king, the Romans condemned Him as a traitor--worthy of death. Although He was neither blasphemer nor traitor, He was given a criminal's death on a cross. Even even experienced the sense of separation from God, crying out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Thus, punished for sins He had not done, God could use Christ's undeserved punishment as the punishment for those who actually deserved it--us. As Isaiah had written centuries before, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

The *cross* on which Jesus received this punishment and the blood He shed while dying for us are reminders to us of His sacrifice to suffer in our place.

Before God made the world, He had this plan in mind (Ephesians 1:4). If human beings, to whom He gave the power to choose, decided to sin, He knew that He would have to send His son, who would have no sins, to die for our sins (1 Peter 2:22-24).

7. We must choose Jesus as our Savior.

While Jesus "gave himself as a ransom for all men" (1 Timothy 2:6), not all will benefit from Jesus' death. When Jesus described the two roads in Matthew 7:13-14, He said that "many" would follow the broad road to destruction while "few" would take the narrow road to life. When Jesus describes the judgment day in Matthew 25, He says some will go away into "eternal life" while others go into "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46). Likewise, the picture of judgment in Revelation 20:11-21:8, tells of those who go into the Lake of Fire and those entering the New Jerusalem.

If Jesus died for all, why do not all benefit? Because God made us creatures of choice. Just as we made a decision to sin and thus to be separated from God, so we must also must decide whether to accept Christ's sacrifice and return to God. No verse states this more powerfully than John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God gave His Son for all but only those who "believe" in Him, who choose to accept Him, shall have eternal life.

Romans 10:13-15 outlines this process in an interesting way. Paul quotes Joel 2:32: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." And then adds that one cannot call if he has not first believed, and he cannot believe unless he has first heard what to believe, and he cannot hear what to believe unless someone tells him.

So, one cannot choose Jesus as his savior unless he hears the story of what Jesus has done, believes in Jesus as the Son of God and savior, and then acts on his faith by calling on His name. Jesus is available to all but each must make a choice. No one is forced to come to Christ, but each must choose to accept Christ as Savior.

8. We must demonstrate our acceptance by obedience.

Faith is a required beginning, but God requires that faith be demonstrated before He rewards it. This is the point of James 2:24: "Ye see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." Even the devils believe, James says, but because they do not demonstrate their faith with action, they receive no benefit.

This corresponds exactly with the case studies of conversions in the book of Acts. On Pentecost, Peter convinced the crowd that Jesus was the Christ and that they had killed him. They believed and asked what they should do. Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Forgiveness of their sins did not come when they believed and cried out asking what to do. It came, rather, after they had obeyed in both repentance and baptism.

Consider also the case of Paul. On the road to Damascus, he saw and talked to the risen Christ. He obviously believed in Christ because, like those on Pentecost, he asked what he should do. He was told to go into Damascus where someone would tell him what else to do. For three days he demonstrated repentance by fasting and praying. Then Ananias came to tell him, "Get up and be baptized and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16). As with those on Pentecost, his sins were not forgiven until after he had accompanied his faith with both repentance and baptism. Had his sins been forgiven at the moment of his faith, as some teach, Ananias would not have told him to be baptized to "wash away" his sins. As a penitent believer, he still had sins. But if he could have those sins removed when he demonstrated his faith in baptism.

So, we must not only choose Jesus by confessing faith in Him, God asks that this faith be demonstrated by a change in our lives, repentance, and our being baptized. At this point, He rewards us with forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Jesus.

9. God restores us to fellowship/relationship with Him.

Once we have confessed our faith, repented, and been baptized by immersion for forgiveness of our sins, God can now restore us to fellowship with Him. The sins that separated us are gone. This was Peter's message in Acts 2:38: repent and be baptized and your sins will be taken away. Paul's sins were "washed away." Because God has now applied Jesus' punishment to our sins, He can now forget about them. And having thus taken them away, He has reconciled us to Himself. 2 Corinthians 5:18: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them."

Our sins forgiven, we are now back with God and we are happy again. This is the good news of the gospel.

10. God puts all the saved into Christ.

God adds everyone who is saved to the body of Christ. Galatians 3:27: "As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." All the saved, then, were baptized into Christ, and thus are in His body. Acts 2:47 says that "The Lord added unto them daily those who were being saved." Thus, as each person obeys Christ in faith, repentance, and baptism and is, therefore, forgiven of sins, the Lord adds that person to the body of those already saved.

Thus, all the saved are in one body, the body of Christ, His church, His kingdom, His family, His bride. There is only one such body of the saved and all those saved by the blood of Jesus are in it.

Those in the kingdom will share in the inheritance God has planned for His own. Not only are they back in fellowship with Him because their sins are removed, but they will live forever with God in heaven. Only those who have thus obeyed Christ are given this promise and this hope.

CONCLUSION

This is the story, then, of the Bible. God had a plan before the world began to create human beings, to give them choice, and, if they chose sin, to have a way to bring them back. This way would require a human being who had never sinned to be punished for sins he had not done--thus providing a way to forgive those who had sinned. After this one had given himself as a sacrifice, the plan was for this message to be spread to all nations, thus telling everyone what was available and how to respond to receive it. When we hear the evidence on which to believe of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, then we must believe on Him and demonstrate that faith with repentance from sin and being baptized for remission of sins. When we do this, God takes away our sins by applying the blood of Christ to them, thus clearing the way for us to return to friendship with Him. Now, instead of facing the prospect of eternal separation from Him in a painful state, we now hope for eternal life in heaven with God.

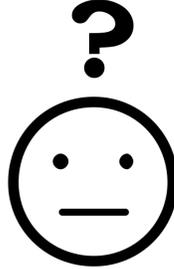
This is the story of scripture. It is the story we must understand, obey, and share with others. It is the basic story line of the Bible which enables us to put its pieces together. It is God's eternal plan: "reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

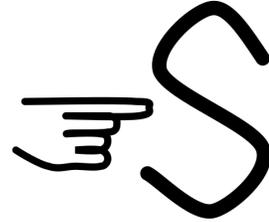
1. Genesis 3:8



2. Genesis 2:16-17, 3:2



3. Genesis 3:6/Romans 3:23



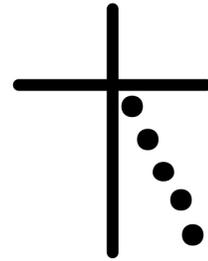
4. Romans 6:23/Isaiah 59:2



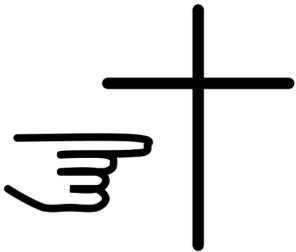
5. Ezek 18:20/2 Pet 3:9/Rom 3:26

P or F ?

6. John 3:16/Isaiah 53:5



7. Matthew 7:13-14/John 3:16



8. Jas 2:24/Acts 2:38/Acts 22:16

F + O

9. Acts 2:38/Acts 22:16



10. Galatians 3:27/Acts 2:47

