

# GOSPEL DYNAMICS 3: THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS CHRIST WITHIN THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

## THE GOSPEL IS CRITICAL

We have been arguing that *the gospel must be central*, in life and, as a result, in ministry. The Gospel must be central because the Gospel saves us from sin, in the form of legalism and hedonism, and the wages of sin (death). What kind of a Gospel is this that can save us from both? On the one hand, the Gospel says that because we are so sinful we cannot work (perform) to earn God's approval (contrary to legalism). On the other hand, the Gospel says that we are so sinful that even our slightest desires can render us prone to making an idolatry of them, and thus, we need the Gospel to be free of the penalty and death-grip of idolatry (contrary to hedonism). Finally, the Gospel says that both legalism and hedonism are perverted forms of one another, one inevitably leads to the other, and one is easily derived from the other. Legalism is "I work for my salvation," which is really a mutated form of "I define (and pursue) salvation my own way," which, in essence, is hedonism. Similarly, hedonism is "I pursue that thing that I believe will bring me true life," which results in a system of faith, values, works, and deeds performed in order to succeed, or, in other words, it results in legalism.

## THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

God's Word must address "the seriousness of sin". How does God's Word do that? Well, God uses His Law, His perfect Law. How does that work? The reason why the Law of God (what a holy God demands in a holy people), ultimately, was given was to show people how serious their sin is. The penalty of not keeping the law of God is that "we should die because we have sinned against a holy God." Consider the Law's function as the Apostle Paul builds up His argument for the need for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (the Gospel). The Law was given for everyone, especially God's people, to live the righteous life:

The Old Testament instituted the "clean laws", a complicated series of regulations for worshippers to follow in order to be "ceremonially clean" and acceptable for the presence of God in worship. Persons could not draw near to God if they ate certain "unclean" foods, if they had touched dead things, if they had a disease or touched someone who did, and so on (see Leviticus 11, 15, 20). This "ceremonial" law was a teaching method by which God showed that sinful people cannot go into the presence of a holy God without cleansing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Redeemer Galatians, Leaders Study 4.

Consider Romans 2:

All who sin apart from the **law** will also perish apart from the **law**, and all who sin under the **law** will be judged by the **law**. 13 For it is not those who hear the **law** who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the **law** who will be declared righteous. 14 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the **law**, do by nature things required by the **law**, they are a **law** for themselves, even though they do not have the **law**, 15 since they show that the requirements of the **law** are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

Everyone is under the Law (somehow), and all have failed in observing the law of God:

Romans 3:19 Now we know that whatever the **law** says, it says to those who are under the **law**, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the **law**; rather, through the **law** we become conscious of sin.

Here, we have one of the most explicit statements about the function of the Law, which is "to make us conscious of sin": "The **law** was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...(Romans 5:20)"

The Law of God (as Apostle Paul is developing, at least, in Romans) should convince us *how sinful (or how much more sinful) we are* in light of God's holiness; understanding the consequence of falling short of the glory of God, as defined by the Law (because of our sinfulness we could not measure up to God's glory, that is, we could not stand in His shekinah presence – we needed a veil to protect us). That truth should drive us to a great Savior who obeyed the Law perfectly, to be perfectly righteous, and yet died by taking on such sin.

A biblical understanding of the Law will draw you into the true Gospel; a wrong understanding of the purpose of the Law will drive you away (in fear / shame / guilt) from the Lord. Only through Jesus Christ can we have the righteousness of keeping all of the Law.<sup>2</sup> This should wake us up from trying to live for our own goodness, and also wake us up from desiring to break the Law, in pursuit of our own desires. Jesus lived life perfectly; He kept all of God's laws; He performed everything right; He obeyed absolutely. The true Gospel calls us *to not work for our own salvation (legalism)*, but to place our trust in Jesus, our alien righteousness, who performed all of the work perfectly for our salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Matt. 5:18, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Christ also died the death, to pay the penalty of breaking the law (that others broke). Sin was so serious that God's justice had to punish sinners for sin. Christ's death was the perfect sacrifice that eradicates sin. The true Gospel calls us *to stop living according to sin and the thinking that it will be alright if we continued in sin (hedonism)*, but to place our trust in Jesus, who died the death to satisfy God's justice for our salvation.

What is the content of your Gospel? Does the Gospel you have, think about, possibly share and teach, preach, and counsel have a Christ that will stop people from working on their own (and trust in His work), and a Christ that overcomes sin, so that He can work that power in believers? Who is in the middle of your Gospel? What is the source of power in the Gospel you have?

### THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS

Too many times, the message from the Sunday pulpit that is passed off as the Gospel is either a "set of principles on living the Christian life" (spinning back to legalism/moralism/religiosity), or "warm inspirations to get through the week" (spinning you towards hedonism/relativism/license living). The Gospel we are to have must save us from legalism and hedonism. What kind of a Gospel does that?<sup>3</sup>

As noted in earlier seminar, legalism and hedonism, the two major category of errors in living life (including the Christian life), have some similarities. As siblings, one ends up naturally with the other. **There is an even more important similarity: both avoid Christ (as substitutionary atonement for sin).**<sup>4</sup> We become legalistic and/or hedonistic because we avoid Christ. We try to work for our righteousness and not accept the righteousness of Christ. We want to take the work of Christ so that we can live life for ourselves, not wanting to do anything really with a life *in Christ*. If the two major errors apart from the Gospel are ways to avoid Christ, then the Gospel that addresses both errors requires Jesus to be restored at the center of our Gospel.

**When we listen for the Gospel, what we need to end up with is Jesus.** If we end up with just a greater realization of sin, we will either "try harder" or "be depressed in failure," and ultimately, we will never experience the transforming joy of being in Jesus. Similarly, if we end up with "God's grace will be even more gracious as I continue in sin," then we will not seek a "life in Christ" in our quest for freedom, or we will "be depressed after much disappointment;" ultimately, we will never truly transform. When

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<sup>3</sup> From the Gospel 1 Seminar, we should be convinced that there could be "human interpretations of the true Gospel that is passed off as the real Gospel."

<sup>4</sup> Again, consider Keller's article ("Centrality of the Gospel") on this major point.

it is the Gospel, then we will recognize our greater sin, and conclude that we need a great Savior and look to Christ alone.

Christ lived the life I should've lived. Christ died the death I should've died. Therefore, I need more of Jesus' righteousness, which is to say, I need more of Jesus.

When the Gospel is preached, we are called to trust (faith) in the Person of Christ, His life and work, His death and resurrection. We begin to have, and grow, in *faith*<sup>5</sup>—not in our righteousness or works but in Christ's righteousness and work. We believe we will not die because Jesus died. We also believe that we will live, because when Jesus rose again, we rose again with Him. However, this new life is in Him; legalism and hedonism counter that new life in Christ (parts of the old self that we must die to). The more we are convinced of the Gospel; the more we will seek out the Gospel; the more we listen for the Gospel; the more we take the Gospel and remind ourselves in the midst of our daily desperation. We are Because we hear via the Gospel that God has deeply loved us in Christ, the more we will fall in love with Christ, and try not to add to the Gospel, to cleanse or beautify ourselves.<sup>6</sup> We are deeply loved, with an everlasting love.

There is an inherent problem we often prolong in our lives: we often confess that Jesus is the answer, yet we continue to have many problems. We say, "Jesus can help us. Jesus is the only answer."<sup>7</sup> However, if we were true with ourselves, we would admit that we often have no clue as to how Jesus resolves our problems. We often walk away from Scripture with good sounding advice (the Law), but not with the "peace that passes all understanding (grace)." Therefore, the critical question remains: **Why is Jesus the answer? How is Jesus the answer?**

#### THE BEGINNING OF OUR PROBLEM

We are all trying to figure out what the best system of life is for us. Of course, we believe that "life must revolve around Jesus Christ," but we often move onto other things. It's not that people do not consider Jesus as important. He is necessary. However, when it actually comes down to living life, and doing ministry, and growing as a Christian, Jesus does not play a central, nor active, role.

An example: at church, someone says, "Let's have Bible study." "Yeah, what should we study?" Someone then says, "Let's study how to evangelize." Great. Another person will

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<sup>5</sup> Faith is the human side response to the work of God.

<sup>6</sup> Keller, in his Galatians 2:11-16 sermon.

<sup>7</sup> This is an example of catchy Christian phrases or truisms. What is a truism? "A statement, which can be easily altered or modified to fit any condition so as to be true." Such a statement has a hint of truth, but the truth has been reduced in its power to help us, change us, show us the light of truth, or warm us with the heat of grace.

suggest, “I think that we need to go back to the basics...Let’s study one of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.” “Oh, we studied that before...Let’s study how to interpret the Bible.”

This is what people are inherently saying: the Gospel of Christ—who He is, and what He has done—is important, but is reduced to serving as the “basics” of the Christian life. To become mature in Christ, we believe we must “move on” from the basics; we believe we have to stop taking the spiritual milk of Christ, and move onto the greater “meat” of the Christian life. We thought to ourselves, “Christ did his job of saving me...now it’s time to move on to bigger and better things in the Christian life.” The system of educating (or growing) Christians may include the Gospel of Jesus, but only as the means to the “truer meat” of maturity.

How do we know that this is true? Go to a Christian retreat or conference. Let’s say you had the choice of the following seminars—“5 Steps of Knowing God’s Will”, “Christian Dating”, or “How to Be a Good Christian Student”, or “How to Deal with Parents”, “How to be Self-Disciplined About Television and Internet”, “How I Could Be a Better Friend”, “Lord, What Am I Supposed to Do with My Life?”, “Jobs for Christians”, “7 Secrets to Spiritual Success”,<sup>8</sup> “7 Basic Steps to Successful Fasting and Prayer”,<sup>9</sup> “30 Days to a More Spiritual Life”, and finally, “Who Is Jesus?”<sup>10</sup> Which one would you go to? My guess is that only the non-Christian or seeker who is really open about his ignorance of Christ will go to the seminar “Who Is Jesus?”

How many various sects came into being all because they say you have the ‘Gospel’, but are you now ready for the secret stuff, the advanced stuff? You often respond with “I know the Gospel, and that once made a difference in my life, but now I’m stuck. So now I have to move on...” To what? To something else? Scripture says, “No.”<sup>11</sup>

**If the Gospel has been too small in our lives, then Christ has played too small a part in our lives. Our problems in the Christian life could be many (losing motivation, not knowing enough about God, temptations, etc.). However, would you consider that our biggest problem is that we do not know Jesus Christ? That our knowledge of Christ is too superficial? That our cross is too small? For the Christian, Jesus Himself is most important for all of life.** Everything, including any of the good, righteous things we can do, must take second place to knowing Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Wood Kroll.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Bright.

<sup>10</sup> Do a search in Amazon, for “Christian” and see what is popular with those who order Christian materials.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, Galatians 2:11-16 sermon.

## JESUS IN THE DAILY LIFE

If we want to become like Him, we must pursue Him. Our simplistic dependence on spiritual disciplines that does not focus on Christ will not help. Such encouragement may be helpful for a few minutes, but without having gone to Christ for the peace, love, joy, sacrifice, suffering et al, then there is no true drive to be able to manifest peace, love, joy, sacrifice and suffer with joy.

What is the fruit of your daily spiritual disciplines? Quiet time? Personal worship? Worship as a congregation? What is the fruit of your spiritual strivings? We need to read God's Word the way God intended. How's that? No matter where you begin in Scripture, you're supposed to end up with Jesus. Therefore, in our spiritual disciplines, when we read, meditate, or memorize Scripture (there are so many ways that we are to draw from Scripture), we are supposed to read with Jesus as the central figure of a Gospel narrative that is being unraveled. (Scripture should be viewed as a history of redemption.)

The disconnect: when we are exhorted to read Scripture, many times we are not given the whole reason. People tell us, "God commands it. Good Christians read it. We know what God's will is through Scripture. We know what principles to live by through Scripture." Those are good reasons for reading Scripture, but exhortations, in and of themselves, can lead us back to a legalistic view of Scripture (and the Christian life), unless we have the proper framework for approaching Scripture: **we are to seek a person, not a set of principles.**

We must always remember that the Jesus of the Scriptures was not a moral teacher who came to use the Scriptures as a manual for godly living. If that were the case, Jesus would've been a failure: no one could possibly succeed in living the life that Jesus calls us to live; Jesus would be the only successful person to live by His standards, and the rest of us would be failures, which, in turn, would make His project a failure. Jesus did not come to be our moral teacher; He came to be our substitute. When we search through Scripture, we are to read every passage with the intent on finding the Gospel in the passage (since it is found in every passage, but not always explicit because the truth has been suppressed in us, and we had exchanged the truth for a lie, as according to Romans 1).<sup>12</sup>

Scripture has its central focus on Jesus; all of redemptive history unveils God's plan of redemption through the ages. By recognizing that Jesus is the central figure of all

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<sup>12</sup> Dr. Ed Gross taught that the goal of our Scripture study should be to find the Gospel; that is the work of the Spirit in us, to give us eyes to see what was once hidden.

Scripture, we come to see that all of Scripture speaks of one story with one Hero. We are to fall in love with a Person, not adore a set of principles. That is how we are changed—through being in relationship with the Person, and not following principles (that have little to do with the Person).

God in Scripture wants us to have Jesus as our central Hero. It is when we have Him central that we have a Gospel that keeps us in grace, and away from performance-oriented striving, or self-centered godlessness.

For the Christian, everything we ever needed to know we have in Jesus (and His Gospel): “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Peter 1:3).” What a simple yet profound truth, that in the singular person of Jesus we have everything. This is both easy to understand even for a child, but will take a lifetime to learn.

As often as needed, we need to reflect on the Gospel—of our inability and of God’s ability in Christ. To grow in our knowledge of our sin and of God’s grace in Christ. And run back into the arms of the Father as many times through the day and week as you can. As Jerry Bridges exhorts in *Disciplines of Grace*, “We are to preach the gospel to ourselves each day” because we need the Gospel that keeps believers in lines with the truth of the Gospel.

## IMPLICATIONS

Which is better, to not know a person’s fault and love them, or to know their faults and love them? There are some who believe that “without knowing all their faults” we should unconditionally show grace and invite folks into the service of the kingdom. They genuinely want to show grace to a potential leader. But strangely enough, when the chosen leader fails in their duty to love and their spiritual and character flaws begin to make matters worse, that chosen leader is shown one of two things: (1) more “grace” without the truth of what is really wrong (in other words, they “get away with it” and are never corrected), or (2) judged, given lesser duties, hidden away somewhere in the ministry, and possibly expunged. When the leader needs grace and truth the most, they receive the least. Why does that happen? Because they were never truly loved in the first place. True love is “knowing the faults of another and still choosing to love them, to help them to become like Christ.” That is the paradigm of relationships in the Gospel. Recall how Jesus established His disciples. He knew their faults; in His fellowship with them over the years, the disciples’ idolatries and agenda were exposed. Jesus’ love had to be unconditional because there was much sin in sinners. In the center of our Gospel, we need Jesus. For only His love can push us beyond the limits of our love.

In marriage, for example, there is a honeymoon period of about a year (so they say). Friends say, "It's great, you should try it." But they also say, "You don't really get to know a person until you live with them." Sometime before marriage and long time afterwards, husband and wife get to know each other's faults. What is true love? Knowing the faults of another, that their sins are greater than you had ever thought, and yet loving them beyond what they had ever dreamed. That's the Gospel. Such is the love of Jesus Christ. Recall how Jesus interacts with all those around him. Did he know their faults and sins? What was his response to such sin, weakness, and faults? In the center of our Gospel, we need Jesus who knew everything wrong about us, but still came to live the perfectly life and die the death for us.

#### DAILY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

We are to do 'Christian' things and live the Christian life with the Gospel in mind. In quiet time: yes. Preaching, and listening to preaching: yes. Every week we gather to hear the Word of God. That Word of God, for the believer, is not supposed to be a word of discouragement, a word of death; the Word of God is a word of both judgment *and* grace. The word of God speaks about our need for Jesus, and His abundant provision of grace. We are to study Scripture with Jesus as the central figure and His gospel in mind. All spiritual disciplines are about our absolute dependence on God via Jesus. All these spiritual disciplines must be done in close connection to the source (Jesus) and the Gospel. That is especially the case with prayer. We pray in Jesus' name, with full dependence on His work on our behalf, which gives us full rights as sons; that's why we pray, "Our *Father...*"

#### MINISTRY

The more we become like Christ, the more we honor, obey and glorify God. And the more we honor, sacrifice for and glory in the gospel in others. The more we have Christ in the center of what we do and who we are, our worship of God will be in spirit and in truth. The more we have Christ in the center of who we are and our fellowship and community, our ministry will be to qualitatively and quantitatively better. Qualitatively, we will be able to counsel more like Jesus and embody His character as we relate to others. They will be affected. Quantitatively, we can better minister to more percentage of folks who are already around us (not necessarily attracting greater crowds). As one example, with my personality and character, some people I can click with immediately, others will take some time, and others I probably irritate. Being more like Christ, I am more assured that I am willing to sacrifice, love, care and sacrifice for more of those around me.

## SCRIPTURE SPEAKS OF THE CENTRALITY OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL

Jesus Himself is most important for all of life because Jesus is all-important in God's plan of redemption for believers. And God's redemption is recorded in Scripture. (Hence, Scripture is all-important for life and faith.)

Philippians 3,

<sup>7</sup> But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, **I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord**, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. <sup>10</sup> **I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death**, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but **I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me**. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 1,

<sup>1</sup> In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but **in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> **The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word**. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. <sup>4</sup> So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Churched people should be well taught that God's Word is very, very important. But how are we to view the importance of God's Word in relation to the person of Jesus? Consider the Gospel According to John, chapter 1: **The Word became flesh**—Jesus Christ. 1 John: **The Word created all things**—creation. Hebrews 1:2: Jesus Christ is the Word—"that God spoke in the last days." Jesus is the giver of the Word and the very Living Word. The way we understand the Living Word is through the Written Word [*logos*]. Jesus is the Final Word (the most perfect revelation) of God, for He is God Himself, His spoken Word.

## Hebrews 12,

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup> **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,** who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In fixing our eyes on the Jesus, three things happen simultaneously: (1) We throw off everything—material and immaterial—that hinders us from the running the Gospel race (as Apostle Paul did); (2) We throw off the sin that so easily entangles and keeps us from running the race of life, including the sin that refers to any boast we have in our own ability—like being a good Jew, being born as an Israelite, religious performance, etc. Finally, (3) We have the joy in the midst of opposition from sinful men.

All of the opposition and sins above will douse the Christian's love. We will lose the love in life—our passion for God and compassion for others—when we choose to fix our eyes on idols (acceptance, approval, joy, comfort, wealth, security, etc.), place trust in our own righteousness, and be completely distracted by the discouragements of men and women. We may lose the joy in Christ: the peace, the love, patience, gentleness, etc.

The solution is to fix your eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2). We are to keep our eyes (of faith) focused on the Son of God, Jesus. What will be the result in our lives? "So that we will not grow weary and lose heart" in the midst of suffering, in a fallen world, to long for heaven. For Jesus is not only the author, but also the perfecter of our faith. He started you off on the Christian journey and He will carry you to the end. As you stay with Him, trust him, and have faith in Him.

The goal of the Gospel (and God's written Word) is to bring God's people into a relationship with the Father, into the family of God. The only way to have a relationship with the Father is to trust in the Son. The Father has given us Himself by giving us His Son. We exalt God when we exalt and recognize the Son. To borrow the phrase from John Piper, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" *via Christ*. Then, when we realize the Father's provisions of love and mercy through the Son, the response is honor and glory to the Father for the redemption He has brought about—what tangible love, wisdom and strength! We need to grow in our relationship with the Father through growing in personal knowledge of Jesus, by fixing our eyes of faith on Jesus, to keep Him central in our hearts, minds and lives.

## GOSPEL LESSON: A HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

The Bible was not written as a random assortment of ‘stuff’ about God and Jesus; it perfectly reveals God’s plan of redemption, which unravels throughout history. This portion of the Gospel lesson provides a short history of the centrality of Jesus throughout the history of redemption, so that we have a brief snapshot, an overview of God’s unfolding plan, as well as see Scripture’s main drive. To say that something is biblical is to say that God follows a unique pattern (as in *biblical* counseling). Thus, biblical theology (the study of God’s plan of redemption through a pattern as revealed in biblical history) helps us to see more of Jesus and His Gospel; we must not just leave the theology as it is, but use it to reveal the further inward and outward counsel of the Word of God that is revealed when the Gospel takes hold of our hearts through the passage.<sup>13</sup>

### ALL OF SCRIPTURE

There are many views of how Scripture should be interpreted. There are also many vantage points from which Scripture should be viewed. For example, an **exegetical** perspective is critical and extensive interpretation of a passage from the contextual, grammatical, and language perspective, drawing interpretation from the relationship of words and phrases to one another within the context. Another perspective is **biblical theological**, taking a passage in the context of the whole of the Bible, from beginning to end, looking at how it fits into the pattern/plan of God’s work (of redemption; there are better ways of defining this). Certainly, there are other critical perspectives which must be taken into account when looking at a particular scope of Scripture; nevertheless, as Gospel Methods works to convince, Jesus Christ and His substitutionary atonement on the cross must reside at the center of each passage. Scripture bleeds of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to overlook the Gospel is to overlook that which each passage is driving at. Why are we so focused on the Gospel? Because Scripture, God’s specific revelation to His people, is focused on the Gospel.

### REDEMPTION

All of Scripture, from a historical standpoint, follows a common theme, which is highlighted by the following pattern: Creation => Fall => Redemption. Life (creation) begins with the creation of the heavens and the earth (“In the beginning...”), continues with the re-creation (or ‘recreation’) of ushering a fallen creation into the Sabbath rest of justification, and then ends in consummation with a new heaven and a new earth. Scripture depicts a plan of God from eternity, into time (divine intrusion), unraveling

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<sup>13</sup> Gospel Methods addresses this challenge, as Biblical Counseling also addresses the challenge head-on.

throughout the major epochs of biblical history; we call this redemptive history, or the history of redemption.

It begins in eternity, with God, our Father and initiator, the elector of the redeemed;<sup>14</sup> from the beginning, He would be glorified through the redemption of His chosen creation. In eternity, the Son had agreed to enter into time, empty Himself of all glory, assume human physical form, become incarnate, submit Himself to the physical laws and to the Law of God, and become obedient to the will of the Father perfectly unto death on the cross. This agreement was established between the Son and the Father, a plan to redeem the chosen, even before time began.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Spirit was to bring Mary to conception and enable the incarnation of the Son, anoint Jesus in His baptism, revive Him from the dead, regenerate and sanctify those who have been called to believe, empower those who are called sons of God for ministry, convict God's them of their sin, enable us to pray, and glorify us in the end. The Spirit, the Son, and the Father, a three-way 'dance' of the Trinity, work together in unison to bring about the Father's plan of redemption; if the Father is the architect, then the Son implements through His work of the Gospel, and the Spirit applies this work for salvation and maturity into our lives. The reason why Scripture is focused on the Gospel, is because, from eternity, that was the plan of God, to reveal Himself, His character, His Son, His Spirit through the work of redemption (the Gospel).

#### CREATION: THE MESSIANIC SEED

Everything we ever needed to learn about the Gospel (creation, fall, and redemption) can be found in creation, Genesis 1-3. From the beginning, God establishes three commands by which His people would live; these three commands existed, then, even prior to the Fall: work, family, and rest. Man was to 'be fruitful' and rule the land (work) of the Garden that was given to him (as a vice-king of the true King); he was also called to 'multiply' (family), and God's provision of Eve depicted the joy of community, just as God enjoyed His cosmic community with the Son and Spirit. Finally, God rested on the seventh day after His creation; we, created in His likeness, are called to do the same. Adam, the most righteous man, served as our Federal Head (meaning that he was God's selected, infallible choice of a representative of all man) during the period of the Garden known as 'probation' with regard to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Obedience would lead to life, and disobedience would result in death. The Head failed, and thus, all men are born in sin.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the sin, the curse of sin reigns: work (the curse on the man), family (the curse on the woman), and rest have all been cursed as well (Genesis 3).

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2.

<sup>15</sup> John 3:16, John 4:34, John 6:38-39, John 17:18-19, Romans 8:3, Galatians 4:4, and Hebrews 2:10.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 5:12-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22.

However, we see the plan of God's redemption begin to unfold from the beginning. The Lord promised the 'seed' of the Messiah to be born through the woman; this 'seed' would crush the head of the serpent, at the cost of His own life.<sup>17</sup> The Creation-Fall-Redemption narrative has begun with the promise of the 'seed' of the Messiah who will be born into the world to undo the curse of the Fall. **Jesus, born as the second Adam, with many Federal similarities, obeys the Law perfectly** (He was tested in the wilderness, and we also see Him tested in the Garden of Gethsemane, as well as on the road to the cross), making Him greater than Adam, as well as the promised seed of the Savior.<sup>18</sup> **Jesus would be the Messiah, incarnate, who would battle Satan (the serpent throughout the generations), and would crush the head of Satan all the while sacrificing His own life.**

With the salvation of Noah, then, we see God's continuing unfolding purpose, to redeem an individual, but also to redeem him to a community (a family of the redeemed). With the redemption is a renewal of the original commands given by God to Adam: to be fruitful and multiply, along with a preface to the Law of God (we see certain laws emerging, laws that would define how God's people would now live in a fallen world). We also see a renewal of the **promise to preserve life, that God would redeem and ultimately work to renew life and creation again.**<sup>19</sup>

What we see inherent in this original Garden narrative sets the pace for the rest of biblical history: **the transfer of guilt**, beginning with the Federal Head, to the rest of man for the rest of time. This transfer of guilt is called **imputation**. Imputation drives redemption because it ultimately points to the transfer of our guilt to Jesus on the cross, and the transfer of His righteousness to us that saves us and redeems us as God's people.

#### COVENANTS: THE ANCIENT CONTRACT

All ancient Near Eastern covenants, like the way our contracts are structured today, have similarities.<sup>20</sup> A suzerain (king or high lord) would establish a covenant with a lesser lord or vice-king (a vassal). They contain the following components:

- (1) Preamble: An introduction of the 'higher' lord; who he is, etc.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Genesis 3:15, the proto-evangelion, or proto-ev[eu]angelium.

<sup>18</sup> Romans 5:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-24, 45-48.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 8:15-9:6.

<sup>20</sup> Research of Mendenhall, later elaborated from an ancient biblical perspective by Meredith Klein.

<sup>21</sup> Exodus 20 provides a great picture of the actual provisions of a covenant.

- (2) Historical Prologue: A description of the nature of the relationship between the two parties in the contract.<sup>22</sup>
- (3) Stipulations: The terms of the contract, that is, what the lesser king is contracted to do, consisting of the apodictic law (“Thou shalt...” or “Thou shalt not...”) and casuistic law (case laws that helped to determine outcomes based on scenarios).
- (4) Sanctions and Oaths: Prominently regarded as ‘blessings’ and ‘curses’, the results of what happens if these laws are obeyed or disobeyed.<sup>23</sup>
- (5) Ratification Ceremonies and Provisions for Renewal: The acceptance of the terms, as well as the renewal of the terms of the contract, the signing, which also includes the process by which the contract is extended to the next generation.<sup>24</sup>

In Jeremiah 34:12-22, we see a picture of the ratification of the ancient contract: the lesser party is to cut specific animals in half, from head to toe (“the hard way”), and both parties are to walk between the pieces. Covenants, thus, were ‘cut’, just as we use the phrase, “We cut a deal.” Circumcision, baptism, the Passover Meal, and the sacraments are all signs of the covenant between God and man. The pieces were to symbolize the fate of the one who fails to live up to the terms of the contract; in other words, the contract was binding, and one who walks through the pieces is vowing, “May I be torn to pieces as these halves of animals should I break the terms of the covenant established.”

#### ABRAHAM: [CHILDREN OF] THE PROMISE

Until this time, the mode of salvation has been through the family context (Adam, the generations leading to Noah, and then the generations leading to Abraham). With Abraham, God promises him salvation as a people of God: to bless him and to use him to bless others.<sup>25</sup> How was Abraham to be sure?<sup>26</sup> God commands Abraham to take specified animals, and cut them from head to toe; what we see, in essence, based on our understanding of ancient contracts, is the making of an explicit covenant. In fact, you see the very components of an ancient covenant in the Genesis 15 narrative.

The most remarkable aspect, however, of this narrative is with regard to the flaming torch that passes through the pieces; during the moment of gloom and doom (darkness and horror during Abraham’s sleep), God Himself passed through the pieces. God was putting His own deity, His own name on the line. We witness an actual physical

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<sup>22</sup> Exodus 20 is an example, known as the Ten Commandments (the Holiness Code).

<sup>23</sup> Blessings: Deuteronomy 28:1-14; Curses: Deuteronomy 27:14-26 and 28:15-68 are explicit examples.

<sup>24</sup> Deuteronomy 29-31 and Joshua 23-24 are good examples of two generations of renewal; this is a pivotal understanding of this text, since there is an opposing theology that views this same passage differently, resulting in different implications.

<sup>25</sup> Genesis 12:1-6 and 15:4-6.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 15:7-8.

representation, a *theophany*, of God, as He Himself ratifies the covenant. God, perfect and infallible, walks the pieces to assure Abraham of the promises He made; what is more, there is no account of Abraham walking the pieces. Instead, the same God who would uphold His promises with utmost integrity, later, on behalf the family of Abraham (the people of God), is torn to pieces amidst the gloom and doom on the day of the crucifixion of Christ. **Jesus, on the cross, upholds His covenant promise, both as the Federal Head (second Adam) and as the greater Abraham, since He upholds the covenant in complete obedience to the Father, and yet, the imputation of sin takes place on the cross (our sin is placed on Him), and His righteousness is imputed to us, the children of Abraham.** The epic drama, therefore, continued to unfold as God promised Abraham that He is his 'shield' and 'reward', his protection and righteousness.

Even prior to the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, rituals such as circumcision were established. The circumcision was a well-kept ritual, introduced in the context of Abraham and his progeny, later to be replaced by the baptism sacrament. The cutting of the foreskin of the male child symbolized the 'cutting' of the covenant, the drawing of blood, the blood-oath that was established between God and His children of the promise. It was God's promise to be our 'shield', our 'reward', to bless and make us a blessing. The ritual was a visual picture of the covenant: its promises, its sanctions, and its oaths. If one violated the covenant, then he was 'cut off' from the living. However, what we find later is that the law itself did not save (guarantee inheritance). **Rather, these laws were provisional, established as a means to point to one who would fulfill the law and save through grace.**<sup>27</sup>

#### LIFE AFTER SINAI: THE [LIFE AND STIPULATIONS OF/IN] THE LAW

The Law that was handed down to Moses, contrary to popular evangelical opinion, was not a means to 'earn' salvation, so much as it established an explicit covenant between God and His people (refer to the footnotes and components of the ancient Near East covenants). The truth is, **God had rescued His people, and then followed up with an established covenant; they were shown grace (carried to Sinai on eagles' wings), then ordered to obey, as opposed to being order to obey as a means to earn God's love.** The establishment of the Law is a continuation of this work of redemption: God was transforming His people, fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham, into a nation of God. This nation would be established as a nation of priest-kings, a royal priesthood, a 'people belonging to God'.<sup>28</sup> Laws govern a nation, and distinct laws define the character of its nation; God was forming a nation of people, chosen among many, to live with distinct values apart from the rest of the world. We see priests and kings of the world

<sup>27</sup> Galatians 3:18-29.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Peter 2:9 explains God's intent.

adhered to these laws; they embraced them as a part of the relationship they enjoyed with God.<sup>29</sup>

However, even the Law was a provisional establishment, pointing to a consummate Man and Savior. On the collection of teachings known to many as the Sermon on the Mount, what do we see? Jesus affirms the Law, on the one hand, but on the other hand, He introduces a higher law. Furthermore, He places an accent on His teaching regarding the works-righteousness of the Jews: He tells them that everyone needs a righteousness that is greater than the Law.<sup>30</sup> **The explicit Law would not die away; it defines the character of God and of His nation. However, this Law was a mere provision until the coming of one who had come to fulfill the Law completely, yet pay the penalty of death for the chosen, to redeem them (to claim them back, from death).**<sup>31</sup>

As citizens of the nation of God, His people would embrace this Law given to them; we are set free to love and obey the Lord, because He first loved us. We don't obey in order to be accepted by God, but we are accepted, and as a result, our hearts are set free from all other vices that captivate us (including works-righteousness), so that we can obey our Father as we would embrace His character. The Law was weak because it cannot save; its purpose is to point to our greater need for our Savior because it mirrors for us how incapable we are (in our sin) to love and obey, even when we are at our best. The Law continues in force, but not as a means to justify sinners.<sup>32</sup> We could not uphold our stipulations of the covenant relationship established with God, which poses a tremendous conundrum: either we must die, or the Law must be canceled. To cancel the Law is to do away with the character of God, His own deity, and His promise to create a nation. Thus, the Law pointed to the provision of a Savior, who would enable God's character of mercy and justice to be upheld and honored; **the Messiah would reconcile God's character, His promises, and our failures by stepping out of eternity and stepping into time, so that He could pay the price of our iniquities and fulfill the covenant in full, thus, ushering in the new covenant.** The inevitable contrasts between the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant are immense, with great implications.<sup>33</sup> **In essence, all the books of the Law point to our need for Jesus and the fulfillment of God's stipulations of the covenant, that we could never fulfill, in Jesus.**

You can further read about each of the laws, each of the ceremonies and rituals, and how each point to our need for Christ, and how each serve as a shadow of Jesus and the

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Kings 2:1-4 and Psalm 119:97 are examples of the Law made explicit since Sinai.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 5:17-20.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 7:7 and 7:12.

<sup>32</sup> Roman 6:14, 7:6, and Galatians 3:23-25.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:7-15.

Gospel. One example that we will delve into deeper in a later section is this concept of the atoning sacrifice.

#### THE COVENANT VIOLATED: THE EXECUTION OF [JUDGMENT IN] THE BLESSINGS AND THE CURSES

So far, we see the consistent unfolding pattern of redemption: a transfer of guilt demonstrated through families, nations, epochs of generations, and also in the established covenant between God and His people, but also through provisional redeemers who point to the consummate Redeemer to come. This explains the course of biblical history from Genesis through Deuteronomy (and others).

What happens when the people violated the covenant? Since the covenant was a legal document, it was used in legal proceedings. If the stipulations of the covenant were violated, one who acted as judge would sit and preside over such proceedings; literally, Moses would sit and 'hear' each issue on a case-by-case basis, and execute the ordinances as stated in the covenant. However, there are instances where God would raise a charge against His own people; the people would be charged legally, as a result.

There were certainly times when the people would rise up against God by approaching Moses (and threatening to kill him).<sup>34</sup> In these narratives, we see evidence of a gracious God, even in the Old Testament, who pays the cost for the provision of His people-nation. **God, who had no fault (many times, it was the people offending the Lord for bringing them out of the land of slavery because they lacked earthly aroma and food, which is really insulting and silly since they were held captive as slaves in those times), who had every right to justify Himself according to the covenant stipulations, would still pay the price, as a provision for the Messiah who would come to justify once for all those who were chosen.**

When God Himself would bring a charge against His people, He would call on a prophet to act as the prosecuting attorney. The books of prophecy provide the execution of sanctions, according to what was promised in the covenant relationship. God was merely executing what He said He would do if people violated the stipulations, but not without promise and hope. The prophets would come, and also follow protocol; throughout each of the books, you see a consistent pattern in the charges raised against the nation of God's people: the chapters would begin with a 'call' to 'hear', followed by the formal charge (how the people violated the stipulations of the covenant in their actions). Usually, the people were in violation of God's commands to preserve justice in

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<sup>34</sup> Numbers 11 et al. Also, Exodus 17:1-6; here is a case where it appears the people have placed God (Moses) on trial. God, however, in His grace, allows Himself to stand trial, and allows Moses to strike the rock (where the Lord's presence would be), so that the people could be given water for life. It was the people who deserved death, and yet God allows Himself to be punished for their lives.

some manner (as opposed to being a corrupt society and government), to uphold social justice and mercy (as opposed to having a social character that lacks compassion for the poor, etc., which goes against God's character of unfailing, redeeming love), and His theology, the knowledge of God (meaning, that the people had forgotten/ disregarded God, His character, His Word, or His commands altogether in their lack of humility). The consequences of such violation of the covenant stipulations were usually made explicit, since the prolonging devastation to the people in rampant crime, abuse, etc., had wreaked havoc on the land and its people. As a result, sanctions (the 'curse' portion of the covenant) were delivered, a forthcoming judgment, along with a call to repentance.<sup>35</sup>

It is very possible, if one does not understand the purpose of the call of the prophets, to misinterpret these passages (standing alone) as coming from a conflicted God (who cannot make up His mind between love and hate, or wrath and mercy); the truth is, the people of the day were very much aware of what the Lord was doing (when they came to their senses). Just as a child is often warned of the consequences of violating his covenant relationship with his father, upon violation of the covenant relationship, sanctions are handed out to teach the child what he was already taught: the harm and dangers of violating the terms of their relationship (the 'circle of trust'). True sanctions bear the character of love and mercy as well, preventing further harm, as well as a wake-up call for the child to return to the character of the household. After all, what is grace? Truth *and* love – one without the other does not characterize grace.

**The prophets bore the responsibility of delivering the word of the Lord with sanctions. Along with sanctions and the call to repent was the prophecy about a future hope of grace, restoration, and healing.** At some point, however, the prophecies ceased, for a period of 400 years. After a period of stillness from the heavens, a man appeared in the desert, often the calling place of the prophets, dressed and looking like the prophets of old, preaching repentance for sinners. Why? Because the kingdom of God is *near (at hand)*.<sup>36</sup> Prophets pointed to the way of salvation (which we will see further elaborated in the next several sections).

At the time of John the Baptist, Gentiles were often given preparatory baptisms in the rivers, since they were considered 'unclean' (makes sense). What offended the Jews about the greatest prophet until the coming of Jesus was this: John the Baptist was calling on Jews to be baptized. Their ritualistic cleanliness was no longer enough; a greater righteousness was required, and the prophets' role was, in part, to prepare people with repentance and cleansing for the work of the Lord. **The prophets, in**

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<sup>35</sup> Hosea 4, Micah 6:6-8, Joel 4:9-16, Ezekiel 30:1-4, and Amos 5:18-20 are all samples of these formal charges.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 3:1-5.

**essence, also preached against religion and works-righteousness; they prepared the way for people to receive a righteousness apart from themselves.**<sup>37</sup>

The prophets were a provisional reminder that the people needed a Savior who spoke as the Lord in several ways. First of all, we see this in the way they taught (they taught provisionally whereas Jesus taught authoritatively). They all preached, ending with the statement, "Thus says the Lord," or "Amen." What they said was a reiteration of the Lord's words. However, centuries later, Jesus would often preach, "I tell you the truth..." which is really the same thing as saying, "Amen," at the beginning of His statements, as a means of declaring His words as the direct, authoritative words of God. Secondly, they taught by pointing to the way, providing hope of restoration; Jesus, however, always pointed to Himself as the way, as the consummate hope of restoration. Finally, the prophets suffered immensely (you see this in the lives of many of the prophets such as Moses, Elijah, David, et al), but they suffered with verbal pain to the likes of "Why me?" You hear that throughout the Old Testament. However, Jesus never complains, and never cries out about His suffering; it was His mission. In fact, you never hear Him say, "Why me?" until the day of the cross, when Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why..." **All the books of prophecy point to our need for Jesus, our hope in Jesus, our salvation in Jesus, our 'way' in Jesus.**

#### BRIEF REVIEW OF BIBLICAL HISTORY THUS FAR

Thus far, we have gone the lengths to prove that all of Scripture bleeds of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; in order for that to be possible, Jesus' Gospel must be central to all parts of Scripture. The following is the continued course of biblical history:

- (1) The High King established Adam and Eve as vice-regents (vice-kings, or vassal kings) of the earth; His intent was clear: to create a royal priesthood.
- (2) The royal priesthood was implicit in the family structure, later to become more explicit in the theocracy established through the Law.
- (3) Judges were established to rule according to the covenant established between God and man; these judges were not kings, but helped to administer the land according to the ordinances of the High King; God was the King of the people, which set this nation apart from all surrounding nations of the world.
- (4) Israel began to resent their 'separate' nature from their neighbors. They wanted the protection and security of a human king, and therefore, at the least, implicitly rejected God as their King.

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<sup>37</sup> The fact that Jesus was not a Levite priest, but of the line of Judah (of kings) in the order of Melchizedek also plays into the idea that righteousness would come from a different order, an alien righteousness, than from the human/legalistic line.

- (5) Saul was anointed as the first king of Israel. He, however, was a failure of a king, the human choice, a complete rejection of God's theocratic rule.
- (6) David was anointed as the greatest king of Israel's history.

#### DAVID: THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM, THE KINGDOM OF THE GOSPEL

There are many passages in the Old Testament foretelling the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>38</sup> In addition, there are many passages in the New Testament that interprets the meaning of these Old Testament prophecies, explaining that Jesus Christ had inaugurated the Kingdom, as the coming King (of the line of David, in the order of Melchizedek).<sup>39</sup>

Going back to King David, we witness an interesting new unraveling of God's redemptive plan; this nation that He has established would become a great kingdom, a fulfillment of all of His promises of the ages, with continued emphasis on His redemptive plan for His people. The people were to maintain the stipulations of the covenant; David would unite the nation and usher in the 'golden age' of Israel. His desire was to build a Temple for the Lord. However, God establishes a unilateral, unconditional covenant with David: the throne of David would last forever.<sup>40</sup> **Even within the text of 2 Samuel 7, we see a preface of the coming of Jesus as the everlasting King.** The course of biblical history meanwhile proceeded as such:

- (1) David passed the kingdom to his son, Solomon.
- (2) Solomon passed the kingdom to one of his sons and servants (Rehoboam and Jeroboam), which ultimately led to the divided kingdom of the North and South.
- (3) Amidst the disturbed and devastated people, Amos the prophet spoke of a restored kingdom of David.
- (4) 400 years had passed until the coming of John the Baptist, the last prophet before the birth of Jesus.
- (5) John the Baptist preaches repentance and institutes the preparatory baptism for the Jews.
- (6) Jesus, the fulfillment of the prophecy of the coming of the King, begins His ministry, preaching of the Kingdom of God, the good news (the Gospel) of the Kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Refer to Ridderbos' *Coming of the Kingdom*. Scriptural references include Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-3, and 11:9-12; Daniel 2:31-35, 44 and 7:13-14; and Zachariah 9:9-10.

<sup>39</sup> Refer to Daniel 2:29-45; Acts 1:9-11; Matthew 28:18; Acts 17:7; Colossians 1:13; Revelation 1:4-5.

<sup>40</sup> 2 Samuel 7 (and the corresponding passage in the Chronicles) clearly explicates this.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 13, Matthew 22, and Mark 4.

The New Testament interprets for us the meaning and significance of the prophecies of the coming Kingdom in the Old Testament. Amos teaches of the restoration of “David’s fallen tent”; the word *tent* here refers to the word *tabernacle*, the same word used to describe the pre-Temple dwelling place of God among His own people. The Temple was destroyed (when the kingdom was divided); Amos’ prophecy was one of a restored Temple; God intended to fulfill that which He promised to David (the restoration was to include the Gentiles, who were considered unclean by the Jews). The physical restoration of the Temple took place eventually. However, this physical restoration would not be the fulfillment of God’s promise, for His unconditional promise (not dependent on the work of man) was for a Kingdom that would last forever. The Apostle Peter would explain the meaning of the Kingdom in the context of the Gospel.<sup>42</sup>

In John 1, we see that God, in Jesus (the Word), made a dwelling place among us; the word *dwelling* again is written as *tabernacled*. Furthermore, in John 2, Jesus clears the Temple, the place where the Gentiles often gathered to meet, because the money changers and merchants made a mockery of the place where Gentiles gathered as an excluded people. The people, having traveled a long time to arrive at the restored Temple, would’ve sought to purchase animals for sacrifice (they would not travel long distances with animals for sacrifice since the animals could die along the way, which could cause ceremonial issues, as well as others) as well as money changers to exchange currencies, would’ve found nothing that day. **All they would find is Jesus and a clean Temple! Thus, we see that the meaning of the dwelling, the ark, the tabernacle, the Temple, and the Kingdom all surround the coming of Christ, the inauguration of the Kingdom of God through His coming, death, and resurrection.**

#### THE ATONING SACRIFICE: THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE

What is the significance of the atoning sacrifice? Why must we make this central in our teachings whenever we teach Scripture? A good way to remind ourselves of the atoning sacrifice through our teachings is this: make sure we begin by structuring the entire exegesis and overall interpretation of the text around the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus that can be found in any passage of Scripture; we make it central by also deriving the whole of the counsel (inward and outward) in our teaching from that starting point of the atoning sacrifice. In essence, the most significant part of the teaching will revolve around the Gospel, and the lesson itself will only be cohesive if it responds and reacts dynamically to this re-structuring.<sup>43</sup>

The atoning work of Jesus was interpreted by many people in various ways. For some, it was a way of drawing attention away from the Jews, so that a political scapegoat is ‘put

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<sup>42</sup> Acts 2:22-36 explains Peter’s sermon. For reference, it would be good to look up Psalm 16:8-11.

<sup>43</sup> I [Donny] have done my best to explicate a method for this practice in Gospel Methods.

down' and the status quo could be maintained; certainly, Caiaphas (although a high priest) and Pilate had this in mind, although they bypassed the deeper, most significant meaning in Jesus' work.

Jesus' sacrifice is also regarded as a ransom, as He even regarded His mission. His death signified victory over the dominion of Satan's forces; in Matthew 16, Jesus claimed that He would build His church, and the "gates of Hades will not overcome it." Although Christians often overlook the nuances of that phrase, it is clear that He regarded His work to serve as more than a seal of a fortress to keep Satan out (and protect Christians via the church); He saw the church's mission to be the same as His own, to advance against the gates of Hades and not be overcome.<sup>44</sup> With regard to God's plan, Jesus' atoning work was indeed the work of redemption; this work involved the propitiation (satisfaction of God's wrath), substitution (atonement), and sacrifice (death for the wages of sin, the shedding of blood). The Apostle Paul affirms these reasons in Galatians 3:13.

However, in order to appreciate what was accomplished on the cross (and to more clearly see why all of Scripture returns or foresees the work of Christ), we have to understand the blessings and curses involved in God's relationship with man. First, we must understand the blessings. If you refer to Numbers 6, you see an interesting passage often used as the benediction by many pastors, and intended as a benediction in the ancient times. There is a not-so-subtle nuance in the pronouncement of the blessings.

Numbers 6:22-27,

The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to **ble**ss the Israelites. Say to them: [The Lord bless you, and keep you], [the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you]; [the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace].' So they will put My Name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

This blessings are three-fold: (1) to bless and keep, (2) making His face shine upon them and being gracious to them, and (3) turning His face toward them and giving them peace. This blessing is known as the beatific blessing, the face of God being turned to them. In other words, the greatest blessing one could receive is the blessing of God's face upon them; all three blessings are really the same blessing reiterated almost as a superlative. We, the church, receive this blessing of the beatific vision when the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.<sup>45</sup> This blessing equaled protection, grace, and

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<sup>44</sup> Steve Smallman emphasizes this point clearly in Matthew 16.

<sup>45</sup> John 1.

peace, which is why upon Jesus' appearance after His resurrection, He granted them true peace amidst the fears of their circumstances.

If the blessing (the path portion of the covenantal relationship) is the intimate presence of God (His face) in your life, then what is the meaning of the sanction (the curse)? The exact opposite, obviously, the lack of the presence of God, complete darkness, would signify the curse. This is why the Jews were so interested in light-dark dialogue in the Scripture.

Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..." He took our place. This atonement, as mentioned before, consists of the propitiation (the satisfaction of God's wrath because of our sin), the expiation (the sacrifice and shedding of blood to pay for our sin), and the substitution (He became the curse for us). Prior to Jesus, we see this in the atonement sacrifice of the high priest of the Jews; an unblemished lamb was sacrificed by the priest, while a goat (the scapegoat) was cast out of the city with the sins of the people placed on its head, so that the sins of the people would also be cast out. When John the Baptist (named as such because he baptized people in preparation for the coming King) first saw Jesus, he proclaimed, "**Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.**"<sup>46</sup> **John wasn't just trying to bring closure to all of the prophecy known to date; he literally was calling Jesus the Lamb and the Scapegoat. The atoning sacrifice was merely a provisional sacrifice until the coming of the true sacrifice.** Jesus was sacrificed through the shedding of His blood; Jesus was cast out of the city for His crucifixion. What is more significant is this: Jesus was completely forsaken; He was shown the curse of the covenant, as if He had violated completely. In fact, Scripture teaches that darkness had covered the land upon His death on the cross. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" was a cry of prophecy,<sup>47</sup> a sign of the curse (Galatians 3:13) as Jesus hung on the tree/cross, and also a sign of victory, since the work was completed, and never to be overcome.

**All of Scripture points to this act on the cross, the atoning work of Jesus, which is central to our lives (justification and sanctification), to the church, and to the mission of the church.** Jesus spoke about it, and the writers of the Scriptures pointed to it and interpreted it.<sup>48</sup> Scripture teaches us about propitiation, even in the New Testament.<sup>49</sup> It teaches about His sacrifice (expiation).<sup>50</sup> The Bible teaches us about the blessings we receive in Christ's curse: reconciliation with God<sup>51</sup> and redemption<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> John 1:29.

<sup>47</sup> It fulfilled Psalm 22, perhaps, the most Messianic of the Psalms.

<sup>48</sup> Refer to passages such as Mark 8:31, its corresponding passage in Matthew 16, John 3:14 and 12:34, Acts 17:3, Hebrews 9:16 and 9:22-23.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 3:25-26, Hebrews 2:17, and 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

<sup>50</sup> Isaiah 53:4-6, John 1:29, 1 Corinthians 5:7, Ephesians 5:2, Hebrews 9:13-14, and 1 Peter 2:24.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT AND RENEWAL

With the installment of this covenant relationship between God and man, there was a dynastic succession celebration, in a way to ensure that the covenant would be passed down from generation to generation successfully. Provisions for renewal were written into the covenant so that each successive leadership would ratify the covenant as a symbol of the renewal of the pledge. In each case, the leaders of the land (nation) would be called together, the faithfulness of the Lord would be recounted, the pledge would be renewed, and the succession would take place. In fact, when you study Deuteronomy 29-31 and Joshua 23-24, you see the similarities of the covenant renewal ceremonies taking place; a misinterpretation of these passages will lead one to believe that there is some legalistic element to the promise of blessing.

In Joshua 21:43-45, as an example, the leaders are gathered, and Joshua is about to 'execute' the provisions for renewal. What does he do first? He recounts the faithfulness of God, that all that God had promised had come to pass. In Joshua 23:1-14, the leaders are gathered, and the pledge is renewed. "I will be gone soon...", "The Lord is faithful...", and "Keep the covenant..." are seen throughout these chapters. If you go back to Deuteronomy 29-31, you see virtually the same process takes place.

In the Upper Room Discourse in John 14-16, what do we witness? Jesus had gathered His disciples prior to His death, and shares a similar discourse: that He will be going away soon. He renews the pledge of the covenant, and prepares to succeed His leadership...to the Holy Spirit, the one who will come once He is gone. What is the sign of the renewal of the covenant? If the Passover meal was eaten as the Old Testament provision, Jesus declares that we now take of the cup (the blood) and the bread (the body) of Christ. The Lord's Supper was the succession ceremonial meal, the renewal of the covenant, just as baptism became the new sign of the covenant (whereas the circumcision was the prior sign). **In essence, all rituals, signs, and ceremonies were intended to serve as a provisional reminder of the coming Messiah.** As we take of the cup and drink, what are we doing? We are working through our own provisions for renewal as the Holy Spirit works to apply the work of Christ [the Gospel] into our lives; He is our Guide, our Comforter ['paraclete' or *parakaleo*], the Encourager.<sup>53</sup> **We obey the Law and we partake of the Sacraments as covenant-keepers,** working out our salvation daily and offering ourselves as living sacrifices in view of God's mercy, as the Apostle Paul taught about in Philippians and Romans, respectively. This explains the warning of taking of the cup and bread when one is not a part of the covenant community; he is

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<sup>51</sup> Romans 5:8-10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, and Colossians 1:19-22 are examples.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 20:28, Acts 20:28, Galatians 4:4-5, Ephesians 1:7, Titus 2:14, and Revelation 5:9.

<sup>53</sup> The Latin word for *comfort* is the word used to describe the Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit provides *power*, since the word embodies *com-forte*, 'with power or strength'.

drinking/eating judgment on himself, since he is feigning a covenant relationship (and ratifying its stipulations, sanction, oaths, etc., when he has not entered into an intimate relationship through Jesus, the only way to the Father), and has not recognized a need for salvation in Jesus.

#### [CONCLUSION] THE GOSPEL AS THE TIE THAT BINDS: CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

The Gospel in the Old Testament, on the one hand is continuous with the Gospel in the New; for example, you see the transfer of guilt from one generation to the next, and the transfer of guilt from a people to the sacrifice, etc. On the other hand, there is discontinuity from the Old and the New; what the ancients saw in shadows, we see in full, and what the ancients foresaw and hoped (with faith in the coming Messiah), we look back on and believe (with faith in the Messiah who has come and will come again). This continuity and discontinuity reveals the incredibly, dynamic relationship between the Old and New Testaments, as well as the unfolding of God's plan of redemption.

This unfolding plan brings new meaning to our understanding of old traditions; in essence, continuity brings value to our fuller understanding of the centrality of Jesus and the Gospel. Similarly, discontinuity also brings fuller meaning: new traditions now exist to help us to see the overall path of God's redemptive plan. The most common examples of this continuity-discontinuity dynamics: (1) Circumcision => Baptism (as a sign of the covenant relationship between God and the church, His royal priesthood), and (2) Passover => Lord's Supper (the feast of covenant renewal).

As a result, how do we view Scripture in this context of continuity and discontinuity? We saw Adam, and the curse of sin through Adam; we also see Jesus, the second Adam, whose seed through the Gospel was preserved through the ages, with redemptive purpose and plan.<sup>54</sup> We see Abraham and God's unconditional promise to bless with a son and land (the true measure of *lasting* wealth in the ancient Chaldean times); we see the fulfillment of the promise in Christ, the Son through whom, because of the Gospel, we are blessed.<sup>55</sup> We reinterpret the curse of the firstborn, the passing of God's wrath through the sacrificed lamb of the Passover, as a provision leading to the Lord's Supper, where we celebrate our covering in Christ's blood (which is why Jesus instituted this meal on the Passover) and the passing of eternal judgment.<sup>56</sup> Moses, who ascended the wilderness [mountain] of cloud and fire (Sinai) to receive the law, points to Jesus, who ushers us to a mountain of joy, so that we may receive grace (because He climbed the hill of Calvary); this Law we obey is one out of liberation and freedom (God has used

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<sup>54</sup> Genesis 3:15 declares the promise, and Romans 5:12-19 reveals the fulfillment.

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 12-15 reveals the explicit promise; Galatians 3:15-29 discusses its fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>56</sup> Exodus 7-12 reveals the curse; Matthew 26:17-30, Mark 14, Luke 22, and John 14-16 helps to explain it through the lens of the Gospel.

even our sin for His glory and the glory of His Son since we recognize greater need for Him).<sup>57</sup> David was promised a kingdom that would last forever, and a temple for the Lord; Peter the Apostle reinterprets the promise through the vein of the Gospel (and the centrality of the Kingdom Messiah).<sup>58</sup>

The church is both invisible and visible, as a direct implication of our understanding.<sup>59</sup> As redemptive history progresses (one narrative being unfolded through history), the above two types of people exist in the church. The first group is the visible church, those who *profess* Jesus and have entered into the community of the Gospel; the second group is the invisible church, the church as God Himself sees it in the context of His unfolding plan.

#### INWARD APPLICATION

1. What is the content of your Gospel?
2. Does what you do in the Christian life, faith, church, and activity make you fall more in love with Jesus? Why or why not?
3. What is the fruit of your spiritual disciplines? What is the fruit of your spiritual strivings?
4. What does it mean when we say that a sermon is Gospel-centered?
5. Who do you want to become? Who do you love?
6. Is your intimacy with Jesus increasing?
7. How do you view the overall plan of redemption unfolding in Scripture? Take a passage, any passage, and begin to view it from the redemptive historical perspective, and identify the Gospel as the centerpiece of the passage (precursor to Gospel Methods: Gospel Hermeneutics).

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<sup>57</sup> Exodus 20 reveals the stipulations, sanctions, oaths, etc. of the Law, and Matthew 5:17-19 and Hebrews 10:1-16 reinterprets our understanding of the Law (and our legal position) in Christ.

<sup>58</sup> 2 Samuel 7 helps to reveal the unilateral, unconditional promise of God; Acts 2:14-39, 22-36, and Hebrews 8 helps us to understand it in fuller detail.

<sup>59</sup> Refer to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* and Louis Berkhof's systematic theological theses.