

135 Purpose, problem and a 2000-year plan

My journey these past months – well, years now – can be summed up as seeing what God has been doing over the *huge span of time* that the Bible represents, and the *huge span and movement of human understanding and behaviour*. (Bit vague, sorry, but read on...)

The most important principle I've picked up is that to understand and interpret the Old Testament, we have to start from an understanding of what God is **really** like, i.e. he's like Jesus: "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" – a God of unconditional love and inclusivity, albeit a God of holiness. I expressed this last time [134] as 'Reading the Bible backwards', i.e. interpreting the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

Secondly, we also need to understand that what the writers of the Old Testament **thought** God was like is sometimes very different from what God is **actually** like – Jesus demonstrates this in his references to the Old Testament.

John Walton's book, "Genesis One" [130–133] has been really helpful to me in seeing what creation is really all about (Gen 1–3), and another of his (much earlier) books¹ has recently helped me with the story of redemption – i.e. the remaining 1186 chapters!

Given the kind of God we see in Jesus, I have some questions for you (+ some possible answers):

Purpose

- What does God want most of all? (To be in a loving relationship with the people of earth)
- Which people? (**All** people **throughout** the world)
- How can God achieve that? (Difficult!)

Problem

- What kind of people did God have to work with, around 2000 BC, when he started his plan? (Warring tribes, who thought that God was [the gods were] capricious and needed to be appeased.)

As Walton says, "Israel in particular came from a milieu [ancient Near East] in which the gods were objects of **mistrust**." (my bold)

Revision questions:

- Whom does God want to bless? (The whole world)
- So how is God going to bless these warring tribes? (Difficult!)
- To enter a relationship, what do you need most? (**Trust** – the opposite of the then current view)
- How do you build trust? (**Make promises and keep them**)

Plan

So here's God's plan (in Walton's view, which I find compelling): Make promises (covenants) and keep them, regardless of how the other party (humans) treat you. God has kept the Noahic covenant, and not brought a universal flood, but the main part of the plan comes in four stages.

¹ "Covenant – God's Purpose, God's Plan" (1994) – but I don't actually recommend you read it, as it's **very** heavy; I really struggled to understand it!

Stage 1: God has to start somewhere, so he looks for someone willing to **trust** him, and he finds Abraham and makes a covenant with him: *I'll make you the father of a great nation, and **through your offspring** I will bless the **whole of humankind**.*

2000 BC: Abraham sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises. (Indeed, the Abrahamic blessing is still available, in Jesus!)

Stage 2: God's people are in bondage, as slaves in Egypt, so God looks for someone to **trust** him and makes a covenant with him: *I will lead you and your people back to the promised land.*

1500 BC: Moses sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and delivered Israel. (That deliverance is now the archetype of deliverance in Jesus.)

Stage 3: God's people are no longer trusting God to lead them. "We want a king, like all the other nations!" So God says, "It'll end in tears!" but acquiesces. They choose Saul, who turns out to be a 'bad king'™. So God looks for someone who will **trust** him, and makes a covenant with him (David): *For all time, there will be a king from your house and line.*

1000 BC: David sometimes trusted God but sometimes didn't keep his side of the covenant; nevertheless God kept his promises and there is indeed a King for ever, from the house and line of David: Jesus.

Stage 4: God's people are in bondage – under Rome's iron hand – and looking for the promised Messiah. God **entrusts** Jesus to Mary's care, then Jesus lives a life of **trust** in his heavenly Father, and God makes a new covenant with his people: *through the death of Jesus, God himself will come to live in his people (extended to include Gentiles) by God's Holy Spirit of truth.*

2000+ AD: We sometimes trust God and sometimes don't keep our side of the covenant; nevertheless God keeps his promise and the Holy Spirit is with us for ever.

So, how do I (after Walton) now view the purpose and plan of God? Each covenant, in turn, has led the people of God further forwards, by revealing more of what God is **really** like, rather than what people at the time **thought** God was like.

No covenant was ever revoked; each built on the previous one; each showed us more of God; and then we get the final, full, new covenant where we see exactly what God is like. Awesome!

So while the covenants ultimately lead to the means of salvation that is found only in Jesus, the **prime aim** of the covenants (according to Walton, anyway) is to reveal more about God, to give us a truer and truer picture, culminating in Jesus.

I hope you find this encouraging.

Bless you all!

Paul Bev. 15.11.20