



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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18. God's Purposes

There is a danger in looking at the history of Israel. Geoff Bingham says, “[I]n seeking to study the history of Israel, we may easily and soon miss the history of God.”¹ Our interest in Israel is not primarily the details of history, as such, but the history of salvation that is greater than those details, even though it is found in them. Israel exists as a “special people” (Hb: ‘am segullah), and so we only truly understand this people when we understand the purposes of God for His creation, and the particular role His people were to have in those purposes.

The lack of information in the Scriptures about Israel’s history in the 400+ years of the inter-testamental period helps us to see this clearly. After Malachi, all that needed to be said about the purposes and promises of God had reached its fullness; nothing more needed to be said. The events that follow are important to Israel and knowing the developments that took place in this inter-testamental time help us to place ourselves more securely in reading the New Testament, but nothing in that time helps us to understand the purposes of God with His people more clearly.

The Purposes of God So Far Seen

1. God’s salvation history begins with creation. The whole of salvation history is about God’s initial purposes in creating. This purpose is never abandoned by God, and is being worked out to this very day. To summarise that purpose of God, we could say that His intention was to create a covenant partner, the man and the woman (=Man) in His likeness, who would work in, with and for Him in bringing creation to fullness and maturity under the rule of God.
2. The fall of Man is terribly significant. It is a refusal to live in the purposes of God and instead to develop our own plans and purposes for this world of which we are stewards, and not owners. God announced at that time an extraordinary thing: that the serpent, who has set the hearts of men and women in this godless independence, will finally be defeated, and defeated through this humanity that God has created.
3. Man’s fall led to increasing cycles of evil—murder and worse—and this was finally judged by the Flood. The Flood though didn’t mark the end of God’s purposes with His creation, for after the cleansing deluge He promised in a universal covenant with creation to sustain creation and to limit His judgments within it.
4. Again sinful humanity asserted rebellious autonomy at Babel, which came under judgment, and the nations of the world arose (a situation which had always been the intention of God.) Following this judgment again we see God at work in grace, this time choosing Abraham out from one nation to be the father of nations, and especially to be the one through whom the nation of Israel would arise. The Abrahamic call is very significant:

¹ Geoffrey Bingham, *Salvation History*, 2nd ed., NCPI: Blackwood, 1977, 2009; p.27

^{12:1} The LORD had said to Abram “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:1-3)

What is important to see is that this covenant and promise is the most important thing about Israel. Israel as a nation in the Old Testament exists so that God’s worldwide blessing may come to fruit. As Geoffrey Bingham says, “Everything relates ultimately, not to Israel, but to the grace of God.”²

Israel in the Purposes of God

Israel was chosen as a kind of new Adam and Eve to God. To be called His treasured possession was not a statement about God’s *feeling* for His people, but rather about their place in His purposes. They were not His pet or His favourite people, but amongst all the nations they were called to serve Him in His salvation history purposes by bearing witness in true worship and obedient life.

Israel rarely accomplished this calling. Idolatry was a continued plague in her life. Even at the “birth” of Israel as the nation knowing the way of the Lord at Sinai, they twisted away into idolatry with the golden calf, calling it the worship of the Lord who had brought them out of Egypt. In all the history of Israel there were only rare times of revival.

God’s judgment came on Israel for her idolatry. “The Lord disciplines those whom He loves.” The history of the nation is in many ways a history of the Lord’s judgments. Time and again the nation found itself under the dominion of its pagan and idolatrous neighbours, from the very early days of entrance into the Promised Land. Apart from the rules of David and Solomon, this seems to have been the norm for Israel. The Kingdom split into two, and the treasured possession became two nations often hostile to one another. Finally at the end of the Old Testament they have suffered the shame of not only domination but also destruction by the foreign powers, firstly as Assyria raided the north and then later as Babylon conquered the south. When the restoration happened, they came back but only as a small state under the vassalage of the Persian superpower. It is hard to read that history as that of the nations being blessed through Israel.

The Prophets and Salvation History

Throughout the whole of this flow of history God had sent, time and again, His prophetic word and witnesses to His truth. (Witness has an essentially prophetic edge to it. Witness is declaring the truth of God’s saving work especially in the context of those who deny or oppose it. It is giving testimony in the midst of trial.) So, from Abel onwards, through Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, up to the prophets of the latter monarchy, God kept speaking His word to His people.

“Israel rarely, if ever, listened to her prophets. They seemed so far away from the current events and patterns of their days – in the sight of the congregation. They were constantly saying things which were unacceptable. Prophecy is confrontation of people by the very voice of God.... It needed the prophets, not only to remind them, but to teach them of the great things which God was (is) about. Prophecy, because it is immediate confrontation, is uncomfortable, and even enraging.”³

The prophets spoke of great themes, which mostly were perceived as irrelevant to

² *ibid*

³ *op. cit.*, p. 28

Israel, and perhaps even a little negative. This great issues in the heart and on the lips of the prophets were the Kingdom of God; the covenant faithfulness of God and the making of the New Covenant; the coming Messiah and the nature of His victory; and the Day of the Lord, when all things would be brought to consummation and all evil finally defeated and punished, and the new world would be brought into its complete unity and fullness in the glory of God. On the whole, the generality of Israel were strangers to these things. When we get to the New Testament we find with delight some who were not, but by and large, Israel missed the purpose of God.

As Israel failed, so the prophetic promise of God's salvation acts grew and grew. Where the covenants to Abraham and to Moses and to David had come to a dead end, the Lord spoke of a new covenant. Where the Kingdom of Israel had come such an abortive end, the promise of the Kingdom of God grew. Where David's line ended in shame, the promises grew and grew of a new start to this line. And where Israel was enslaved in her sins, and dry through the lack of the Spirit, the promise grew of the forgiveness of sins and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. *Israel's defeats, loss, deficiencies, all highlight the grace of God.*

Discussion questions:

1. What recurring themes and lines through the story of salvation in the Old Testament have stood out for you?
2. "The Old Testament is in the New revealed; The New Testament is in the Old concealed." What do you think that this statement is telling us?
3. Israel resisted the prophetic voice of God to them. How does sinful resistance to God's prophetic word show itself in today's world, and in today's church? What are the kind of messages and sermons that *you* don't like to hear? Is that because those messages are not prophetic or because they are? (There is no accusation or assumptions being made in the question!)