

## STUDY 20

# All with the Goal in View

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There is an assumed convention in our schools that might lead us to treat our topics as beginning with Genesis 1 and ending with Revelation 22 and, as someone has suggested, having the cross of Christ appear somewhere near the middle. That is hardly a wrong approach, given that we are working within the framework of the scriptures as they have been passed on to us. What is more, as believers we are captured by the centrality of the cross, not only as a key theological feature but also as the very heart of our capacity to understand the multifaceted purpose of God.

One of the problems with such conventions, however, is that teaching, and so ministry, can become formulaic. In other words, we may tend to search for methods by which our particular ministry can be shaped to function more successfully in our present context, however we may come to understand that context. We will attempt to protect ourselves from any ragged edges in our lives and ministries.<sup>1</sup> What I want to suggest is that ragged edges, or whatever we may call them, will appear whenever we see *ourselves* as defining who we are and what we do unless, of course, we have totally secured ourselves against the unforeseen.

## JESUS IS LORD

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36).<sup>2</sup>

There is a superficial ambiguity in The Acts of the Apostles. When the word ‘Lord’ is used it is not immediately clear whether it refers to God, either directly (Acts 3:20; 4:24–30) or to Yahweh/the LORD (Acts 2:20–21; cf. Joel 2:31–32) or to Jesus. Probably the majority of uses of ‘Lord’ are in fact referring to Jesus, so that statements such as Acts 2:47 indicate something quite substantial:

... praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:47).

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<sup>1</sup> I am not suggesting that there may not be helpful advice around. See as a recent example: [http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/ministry/churchlife/anxiety\\_busters\\_healthy\\_ministry/](http://www.sydneyanglicans.net/ministry/churchlife/anxiety_busters_healthy_ministry/) (sourced 30.05.2010).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation or paraphrases.

## *All with the Goal in View*

It is the Lord who is in action in the growth of the church and that Lord is Jesus (cf. Matt. 16:18). Perhaps the two uses of ‘Lord’ in Acts 1 help to show a dramatic change in the thinking of the apostles. Acts 1:6 is the conventional title which equates with ‘Sir’ (cf. John 4:11; 9:36), while Acts 1:24 seems addressed to God. But without explanation of *how* the change took place the coming of the Spirit transformed the understanding of the believers. They now knew that Jesus is Lord and that his reign, as Yahweh and as the last Adam, is over all things. What we might style as ‘Christological development’ is open to speculation and research but one thing seems certain: in matters of life and ministry, they knew that Jesus is ‘Lord of all’ (Acts 10:36). When it came to the security of the church, the believers were disciples of the Lord (Acts 9:1):

After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. <sup>22</sup> There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, ‘It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.’ <sup>23</sup> And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe (Acts 14:21–23).

While persecutions (trials, testings etc.) may come unexpectedly and unpleasantly, nothing was outside the protection of the Lord. Put another way:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ <sup>14</sup> I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

<sup>15</sup> For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

<sup>16</sup> They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

<sup>17</sup> for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’ (Rev. 7:13–17).

A couple of things here should be noted. The first is that this ‘great multitude’ (Rev. 7:9) is described as those ‘who have come out of the great ordeal’ (v. 14 NRSV, also RSV, NIV). The ESV has ‘these are the ones coming out of the great tribulation’, which most accurately expresses what was written.<sup>3</sup> These are the ones continually coming out of their suffering. It is only for a little while and their safe deliverance is because they are stainless, their robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb. And here is the point. They are secure before the throne of God, ‘for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life’. The Lamb is the Pastor, the Shepherd. The springs of the water of life are the promised refreshment in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21:6), the river

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<sup>3</sup> οἱ ἐρχόμενοι, *hoi erchomenoi*. The great multitude ‘are coming’; the word used is a present participle. The AV, RSV and the NIV support the NRSV sense of a past action, possibly indicating that the passage is anticipating a future deliverance which is then being described as completed. But other translations, ASV and NASB have the present tense ‘the ones who come out’.

## *All with the Goal in View*

which flows through the city (Rev. 22:1–2). The church is being kept by the Shepherd with the goal of the new heavens and new earth in view.

### THE MAN WHO REIGNS

Our aim must not be to push our theological barrows for their own sake, or for ours. But if the theological is true, then we are obliged to urge the church of God to see themselves as they are in Christ. And if they are in Christ then the full glory of that position must be presented. The church is human—and so is its Shepherd!

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5, NIV).

The purposes of the triune God are effected through Jesus the Messiah of Israel, who himself is the word who became flesh. Far from this being a theological abstraction, this should be a source of great confidence for those who put no confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3):

With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup> he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup> as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:8–10).

Modern Jewish and Gentile believers, separated by time and space from the New Testament, are not returning to the past for their comfort but are caught up into the plan for the fullness of time when all things are gathered up in Christ. The significance of this can be lost if we do not recognise that ‘Christ’ is not primarily a name but a function. The Christ is the Jewish Messiah through whom Israel’s role in history is climaxed and fulfilled. All of history will be gathered together, or ‘summed up’,<sup>4</sup> in him.

From the whole of the revelation of the scriptures we can see that ‘things in heaven and things on earth’ refers to the whole of creation (Gen. 1:1; Rev. 21:1) and in particular to the church which, while seated with Christ in the heavenlies yet struggles with earthly weakness and sin (Eph. 4:17–5:17) and struggles against the powers which seem to dominate the heavenlies (Eph. 6:12), though they have been disarmed (Col. 2:15).

Yet their Shepherd is not just the one who cares for the sheep, he is their guarantee, their surety. The power of God to achieve his purpose in the church is displayed in Christ’s glorified humanity:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. <sup>22</sup> And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:20–23).

God put all things under his feet because that is a characteristic of true created humanity (Ps. 8:6). We do not yet see all things under our feet but we do see Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Apollos, Leicester, 1999, pp. 111ff. and n. 97.

## *All with the Goal in View*

(Heb. 2:8–9). And God has made him head over all things *for* the church, which is his body, his Bride (Eph. 5:29–30). And his love for the church is with a view to *him presenting the church to himself* in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:27). And he must do this, since the church is his fullness. He finds himself in her as his Bride. The last Adam cannot fill all things (Gen. 1:26) without her. What is not good for the first Adam (Gen. 2:18) is not good for the last.

### **NO RAGGED EDGES**

... do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:17).

So often we hear people urged to understand God's purposes as being for our safety or prosperity or whatever. Jeremiah 29:11 looms large. But that prophet was saying to the people that they must go through the judgement. They will be returned to their inheritance but not before their hearts are turned from willful rejection into those which seek the LORD. And even then, if they do seek him, *he will let them* find him. But the principle enunciated by the apostles is that 'through many trials we must enter the kingdom' (Acts 14:22). We should be aware of some of the New Testament indications of this:

As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them.<sup>10</sup> And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.<sup>11</sup> When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death;<sup>13</sup> and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved (Mark 13:9–13).

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.<sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.<sup>20</sup> Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also.<sup>21</sup> But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me (John 15:18–21).

... when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.<sup>41</sup> As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name (Acts 5:40–41).

I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name (Acts 9:16).

... and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:17).

Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.<sup>8</sup> Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me,<sup>9</sup> but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.<sup>10</sup> Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:7–10).

## *All with the Goal in View*

In this [salvation] you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Also, the Book of the Revelation abounds in descriptions of the believers suffering, from dragon, beast, and false prophet and from their celestial and terrestrial devotees. The victory of the saints is not that they avoid the suffering but that Christ has triumphed on our behalf and continually gives us his victory (1 Cor. 15:57). The brothers and sisters have conquered the dragon *by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony* (Rev. 12:11). It is for that reason that the accusations of the dragon cannot hold them in their former guilt. And it is for that reason that true pastoral care will always keep men and women in the fullness of the cross. It is the *Lamb* who is the Shepherd.

There can be little doubt that the pain is often severe and fully intended to cause believers to recant in some way, even if only through private and personal compromise, or suffer because of their refusal. But what is also clear is that these intentions of the enemy are not beyond the knowledge and care of the Shepherd. He himself knew that it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer and then enter his glory (Luke 24:26). It was not merely unavoidable but essential. Peter spoke of the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory (1 Pet. 1:11). Geoffrey Bingham said often that ‘suffering is not the cost of glory, it is the way to glory’. This was not masochism but awareness that these things must be.

Hebrews 12 looks at the matter of suffering from a different angle, noting that because we are already sons we must endure the essential discipline that trains us in that sonship. The discipline may include punishment but is not restricted to it. The aim is participation in his holiness, ‘the peaceful fruit of righteousness’ (Heb. 12:10–11). This is not an afterthought but the process that has already been established in Jesus, the elder brother:

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. <sup>11</sup> For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters . . . <sup>5:8</sup> Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; <sup>9</sup> and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb. 2:10–11; 5:8–9).

In Christ there are no ragged edges. There is nothing unforeseen or outside the Shepherd’s care and control. Obviously, so much happens that is unexpected in the thinking and experience of the believers, but:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:28–30).

Things are only unforeseen by us. But our destiny has been set—and accomplished! The pioneer of our salvation has already been made perfect through suffering (Heb. 2:10).

## *All with the Goal in View*

### THE GOAL UNSEEN

... in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope ... (Rom. 8:24).

To be saved in hope seems strange to those who want things neatly presented. But that is not the nature of faith. Faith is our reliance on what God has said and on that alone. We declare the glories of the holy cross and still see the shameful presence of sin; we speak of the victory of Christ and still see him ridiculed and maligned, even by those who claim him as their own. But faith comes by hearing and hearing by the utterance<sup>5</sup> of Christ (Rom. 10:17). He who spoke creation into being has spoken the new creation into being and we have heard him. He has given us the faith through which we have come into this great salvation (Eph. 2:8–10). So no matter what we may see, we believe what he said, and walk by that (2 Cor. 5:7).

So what of the declaration that believers are washed clean from sin and are not under law's condemnation? The temptation to doubt the reality must be recognised but so also must the fact that the flock which is eschatological is also provisionally so. The sin in the believers and in the church as a whole is no less sin because we are saved. But it is the ontological which exposes the provisional, without excusing it. It is the ontological which is known by faith. It is the coming of the Holy Spirit which reveals the depths of sin. It is our life in Christ which makes us aware of the horror and ugliness of the body of death (cf. Ezek. 36:25–27, 31).

Faith believes what God has said of us and to us, and so lives in that, painful and difficult though it may be. The essence of suffering is moral: will we believe what God has said and remain faithful to that or not (cf. Rev. 14:12)? That was the issue in Eden, it was the issue set out in our Lord's temptations, and it remains the issue now. Attempts to construct any other situation besides that, in order to by-pass the good fight of faith, are supremely foolish and disobedient, because 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1, AV).

### THE COMING SHEPHERD

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away (1 Pet. 5:4).

Whether called to be shepherds of the flock or gifted in other ways, our hope is for the appearing of the Chief Shepherd. This will not just be the climax or the end, so much as the beginning of all that God has purposed for his Son and the Bride. For the present, Paul's prayer is that:

... with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,<sup>19</sup> and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power (Eph. 1:18–19).

To know the hope to which we are called, and then to lead a life worthy of that calling (Eph. 4:1), is immensely rich and liberating. It means that, knowing the goal, we can

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<sup>5</sup> ῥῆμα, *rhēma*.

## *All with the Goal in View*

receive all that comes to us as gift, in view of what lies ahead. Our calling is not only to some present state or dignity but also to the life as participants in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), which can be known only in the action of the members of the divine family; the Father, the Son, the Spirit and the Bride together in the home prepared. But knowing the hope to which we are called will put us in conflict with all those powers which try to call the purposes of God into question and to cause our attempt to live a life worthy of our calling to be most painful at times.

Given that this hope *and* this conflict are the present state which faith knows, it is a tragic travesty for those who are under-shepherds to present the situation as otherwise. The Chief Shepherd himself has told his flock: 'Surely I am coming soon' (Rev. 22:20).

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'  
And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.'  
And let everyone who is thirsty come.  
Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.  
. . . Amen, Come, Lord Jesus! (Rev. 22:17, 20).