

What the Bible Really Says

CHRISTIANS WILL OFTEN TELL YOU, 'YOU'RE SINFUL AND GOD IS GOING TO cast you into hell— but believe in Jesus and you'll escape!' Well, the Bible does take sin very seriously, and Jesus *is* Lord, but it's not quite like that. First of all, *God is not our enemy*. If we sin (and who doesn't?), he's not looking to kill us, but we *are* failing to be the true human beings he created us to be. And even if we don't (yet) know any better, he wants us to be whole! For his project of creation is about holiness, justice, and beauty. And sinners or not, don't we really want to live with God's own life?

So ok. If we want to be part of God's project, we first have to find out what God's project *is*. Then we can talk about how *something's* obviously gotten off track— and what God has done, and is doing, to get it back on track, and to get it all the way to its final goal. Then we can know *what* to be part of, and *how* to be part of it— then we will know *God's* way of bringing *his* holiness, justice, beauty, and life into world. We will know what direction to face, as we look forward to the day he will bring everything— including our own tiny efforts— to complete perfection.

God's project, by the way, is not about 'saving' us so we can 'go to heaven'. It's not about 'heaven' at all! God's project begins *here*, with *creation* (Genesis 1) and culminates *here*, in *new creation* (Revelation 21). It doesn't end up in 'heaven'; it ends with a new Jerusalem coming *down* from heaven (Revelation 21.2). Don't we pray every day, 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven'? God's world— our world!— is *hurting*, and he wants to make *this* world— his world!— new, pure, and whole again. He wants to destroy *corruption and death*— not his *world*, which he said was 'very good' (Genesis 1.31)! So the Bible is about how God is rescuing *this* world and how *this* world intersects with the *future* that he is bringing about— and about our role in this project of his. In other words, the Bible is about... our *resurrection!*

God wants to put the world back on track and bring it to the fullness of life— not to just snatch us up to heaven before he destroys everything by fire. To fix and transform his world, he will have to do for us things we can never do on our own, but *we do have a role to play in his plan!*

And that's what the Bible is about: What God is doing. So here's how the story goes, and where he invites us to join in:

In the beginning, God created the world by his Word alone (Genesis 1.1; John 1.1). Now, when the Bible tells this story, it's not talking about the 'scientific origin of the universe'. It's talking about how God built a *temple*, and put *man* in it. The 'man' ('Adam', whose name just means 'Man') was to be both God's *image* (because every temple has to have an image of its God), and God's *high priest* as well. Now, an *image* is something that *reveals*, and a *priest* is a *mediator*. So Adam is someone who *brings God into the world and brings the world to God*. What will happen when God and the world connect through this priest? The Bible's word is: 'Glory!', and Glory is what Adam was made for—

And the whole world will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of God
as the waters fill the sea. (Habakkuk 2.14)

That was God's plan. It got off track, but it's what finally happened in Jesus. But we still have to tell how.

We all know this part: Adam disobeyed and was cast out of God's temple/garden. He had children, and then died. One of his children murdered another. Things went from bad to worse. Finally God made a great Flood to flush away the blood, but he saved Noah and his family. Those people weren't exactly pure of heart, but God had to work with *someone*. It went on like that for a long time.

Then, out of the blue, God called a man named Abraham (or 'Abram', to begin with), and told him to leave his ancestors behind and go to a new land he would show him. 'And all the nations will be blessed in you' (Genesis 12.1-3). So Abraham trusted God, and God made a 'covenant' with him: be faithful and I'll restore what Adam lost (Genesis 17.6-8; Romans 4)— and I'll do it through you and your seed. God started with *one* person so that eventually he could bless *all* nations. He had to start *somewhere*, and that *somewhere* was *Abraham*.

So Abraham had a grandson named Israel, and Israel and his sons went down to Egypt, and the whole family ended up as slaves there for 400 years. Then God raised up a man named Moses who brought them out into the desert, to a mountain named Sinai, where he gave them a Law as their distinguishing mark. This Law contained many rules, like not eating pork— God didn't think pork was bad (after all, he had created the pigs and said they were 'very good!'); he didn't care if people ate pork— but he just wanted his people to show they were his by *not* eating pork! (It really had nothing to do with public health, even though people often say it did.)

This tribe that God chose was not more important than anyone else (Deuteronomy 7.7, Psalm 105.12). After all, they were sons of Adam, as much part of the problem as all the others! But God had to start *somewhere*.

And because God's plan requires man's cooperation— *that's the point, isn't it?*— Israel needed to *be faithful to God*. Only *then* could God's blessing flow to all the nations, just as he had promised! So God was looking for even one faithful Israelite, in whom he could realize his plan.

Well, Israel's sons had a long history with God— another 1000 years or so— and even had a great king named David, 'a man after God's own heart' (Acts 13.22), whose descendants God promised would sit on the throne forever, even if they were unfaithful! (Psalm 89). But in the end, "there was none righteous, no not one" (Ps 14.3, 53.3, Rm 3.10,12, 1Co 6.5). Israel broke every last one of God's commandments. And God, who had promised to be faithful to them, had also told them: 'Keep my commandments, and I will bless you; break them and I will cast you out of your temple/land/garden, into exile' (Deuteronomy 32.36 etc). Sound familiar?

So just like Adam, Israel went into *exile*: Babylon, 70 years. But God had *committed himself* to King David, to his tribe, and to humankind. What was he going to do now?

Well, he sent the Persians to overthrow the Babylonians, and the Persians let the Jews (as they were now called) go home and rebuild their broken temple. That was nice, but they weren't really free. *God's own people* were still under heavy taxation and foreign domination! *Darius*, not God, *was Lord!* And after the Persians, came the Greeks, who built an altar to a pig in their very Temple! And then the Romans, the worst of all: The Jews didn't like the Romans, and kept trying to revolt. So, just to show how bad they

could be if they really wanted to, a year or so before Christ began to preach, Pontius Pilate crucified 10,000 Jews on the road from Jerusalem to Joppa, the coastal city. Imagine walking from Joburg to Pretoria, and every 50 meters or so on either side of the road is a guy nailed to a cross, dying in agony. And you don't have a choice: you take that road, or your business dies and your children starve.

So that's what it was like with God's people when Jesus began to preach. *Caesar was Lord*, and you'd better not forget it!

Now as we said, in the beginning, God created the world by his Word alone (Genesis 1.1; John 1.1; Psalm 33.6). And that Word, who 'was with God and was God', 'became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.1,14): That was Jesus. Now Jesus stayed home for 30 years, but when he came out to preach, the first thing he said to all the people who had just seen all those crucifixions along the highway, was, 'Change your minds. God's Kingdom is here' (Mark 1.14-15).

Crazy, for sure (Mark 3.21). But that's what he said— and he meant business. I mean, he really made it stick. Not the way people expected— everybody was thinking that God— who had promised to bless them, to install David's son as king forever, and to make the Jews his favored people— was going to raise up an Anointed One (a 'Messiah', or 'Christ')— a true Son of David— to stamp the Romans' guts into the ground (2 Samuel 22.43), dash their babies against the rock (Psalm 137.9), and make all the nations bring tribute to them *now* (Psalm 18.43-45 etc). But...

True, Jesus went around acting like God himself (Mark 2.7), and proclaiming that God's reign had begun (Mark 1.14)— with himself as king! But naturally— especially after he chased the businessmen out of the Temple (Mark 11.15-16) (which was not only the biggest bank in the Roman Empire, but the center of Jewish plotting against Rome)— the rulers of the people got together with the Romans and *crucified* God's Anointed King (Mark 15.25-26). *Caesar is Lord*— right?!

Wrong! Jesus was that faithful Israelite that God had prepared his whole plan for, all along! For according to the secret purposes he had been acting on since the world began (Romans 16.25; 1 Corinthians 2.7; Colossians 1.26-27, 2.2), when the time was right (Galatians 4.4), God had sent his only-begotten Son to 'dwell among us', to fulfill everything that Israel was supposed to fulfill (Matthew 3.15). And God had promised that he would respond to Israel's faithfulness when Israel was finally faithful, by blessing them and all the nations through them. So when the faithful Israelite 'fulfilled all righteousness' even unto death, God raised him from the dead and *established him as King, Lord, and Son of God in power*, by the resurrection (Romans 1.4; Philippians 2.6-11). *Jesus, God's Messiah, is risen!*

So now— here's the *REALLY BIG NEWS*: **JESUS IS LORD**, and **CAESAR IS NOT!** God's kingdom is *here!* Even death itself has no more dominion (Romans 6.9; 1 Corinthians 15.54).

The Bible is not a rule book or a collection of moral examples. It is a *story*, and it is *news*: JESUS CHRIST HAS CONQUERED DEATH! That's *news*— not *advice*. Something has *happened*, and once you hear about it, and click to it— you see everything differently: Is Caesar Lord, or is Jesus Lord? *Who is our real Lord?*

We'd be wrong if we thought this Good News was just about a new religion, or 'spirituality'. There were lots of new religions in the 1st century. But

the Romans persecuted the Christians because they felt *threatened* by them. Why? Because Jesus calls us together as new *community*, indeed a *Kingdom* that should 'inherit the earth' (Matthew 5.6 etc)— not by taking up swords or guns against the Empire— but by giving *evidence* of the new life God has given us in Christ, by the way we live and the new kind of community we make. We're not just waiting for heaven. We are already to *be* God's new Kingdom that has broken in to our world through Christ's Resurrection. Jesus came so that we could *know God* not just in our ideas, but 'as waters fill the sea'. He wants us to *be* for the world the *redemption* that he was for *us!* (Romans 12).

So the rest of the New Testament is about how we fit in to God's plan: First, the nations can be part of God's kingdom now. It's not just for Jews any more: People of course have to *hear* the good news, but when they accept to live by Jesus' faith— that means, to accept his attitude towards what *God has done and is doing in him*— they can be baptized (Matthew 28.19)— that is, commit to die with him and be raised with him (Romans 6.1-11). They can be fed with the flesh and blood of his resurrection life (John 6), and live by his Spirit. Oh, even if you're a Jew now, you can eat pork (Acts 15; Galatians 5.3), because the old identity markers that separated God's people from the nations aren't so important when the nations are all invited in to God's people— the new mark of identity now is Jesus' own faith in God (Galatians 2.15-16; Romans 3.22), which we share, and the Spirit that is his (Galatians 3.14; 4.6-7), which he gives us.

People often get excited about parts of the Bible like the so-called 'Book of Revelations', and they like to look for all kinds of 'predictions' in them. We'll talk about prophecy and about that book another time, but you should know that the book is really named, 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' (1.1), which tells you a lot already. What we see in such books is a vision of *what God has done and of God's Temple finally restored and fulfilled*. It shows you what God's plan was, all along— from the very beginning!

So what the Bible really talks about is the meaning of the universe, and of history; about the loving God, who started with Abraham to bring his project of new creation to the perfection he always intended for it, through Jesus, by the power of his Spirit. It talks about heaven and earth made new again (Revelation 21.1,5)— about God restoring his temple and his priest (that's you and me) to our true vocation.

It's about how God wants to flood all of creation with his justice and glory, 'as waters fill the sea' (Isaiah 11.9).

And what else would we want? And whose project shall we be part of, then— Caesar's, or God's?



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