

What Your Bible



Really Says

SOME CHRISTIANS WILL TELL YOU, 'YOU'RE SINFUL AND GOD IS GOING TO THROW YOU INTO HELL—

but just 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*. The story is about how we *are* failing to be the true human beings he created us to be, and about how God wants us to be whole! His project (creation) is about holiness, justice, and beauty. Sinners or not, don't we really want *God's own life*?

So ok. We want to be part of God's project. First we 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 can know *God's* way of bringing *his own* holiness, justice, beauty, and life into world. We will know what direction to look, toward 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'; rather a new Jerusalem comes *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— not his *world*, which he said was 'very good' (Genesis 1.31)— but *corruption and death!* So the Bible is about how God is *rescuing* this world. And the Bible talks about how the *future* God is bringing about *already intersects* with the present we're living in— and about our role in this project of his. In other words, the Bible is about... our *resurrection*, in every sense!

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

So the Bible is about what God is doing. Here's how it goes, and where he invites us to join in:

In the beginning, the story says, God created the world by his Word alone (Genesis 1.1; John 1.1). This isn't about the 'scientific origin of the universe'. It's about how God built a *temple*. Now, every temple has to have an image of its God, so God made an image out of clay and installed it. This image— *man* (the Hebrew word for 'man' is 'Adam') was also going to be his *high priest*. An image *reveals*; a priest *mediates*. So this human was to do for the world what God did for the world: bless it.

'Adam' was to *bring God into the world* and *bring the world to God*. What happens when God and the world connect? The Bible's word is 'Glory!'

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. Now, God gave Adam one rule and said, 'Keep it, and I'll bless you; but break it, and you'll certainly die.' Adam broke it. So death entered and God cast him out of the temple/garden of life, into *exile* (Genesis 3.22). But that meant *God's* plan was off track! So the rest of the story is about how he finally completed it through a 'new Adam', Jesus (1 Cor 15.45). But *how*?

Adam's fall was severe. He had kids, and first thing you know, one murdered another. Things went downhill from there. Finally God made a great Flood to flush away the blood, but he saved Noah and his family. They 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 ('Abram', to begin with), and told him to leave his ancestors and go to a new land he would show him. 'And all the nations will be blessed in you' (Genesis 12.1-3). Abraham trusted God, and God made a 'covenant' with him: 'Be faithful and through you and your seed, I'll restore the blessing Adam lost!' (Genesis 17.6-8; Romans 4). He had to start *somewhere*, so he started with *Abraham*. He started with *one* person, so he could bless *all* people.

Abraham's grandson was Jacob/Israel, and Israel and his family went down to Egypt and ended up as slaves there for 400 years. Then God raised up Moses, one of his descendants, to bring his people out. Pharaoh chased them, but God split the Red Sea for Israel and then

drowned Pharaoh and his army in it when they chased after them. God brought his people into the desert to Mount Sinai, where he gave them teachings. His Teaching ('*Torah*', usually translated, but not very well, as 'Law') contained many rules, like justice for the poor and not eating pork. God insisted on justice. And he didn't think pork was bad (after all, he'd created the pigs and said they were 'very good!')— but he wanted his people to remember that they were his by *not* eating something other people ate! Also, pigs were a common sacrificial animal in pagan religion. (It was really about *identity* and *pure religion*, not about 'public health', a modern idea.) So even when it came to pigs, the Teaching was about justice and not worshipping lies.

From the beginning, God's plan required man's cooperation— *that was the point of being a priest*. If Israel would be *faithful to God*, then God's blessing flow could to all the nations, as he had promised! So God was looking for a faithful Israel, in which he could realize his plan. Israel, the tribe God chose, was no more important or better than anyone else (Deuteronomy 7.7, Psalm 105.12). But God had to start *somewhere*.

Well, Israel's sons were still Adam's sons, as much part of the problem as anyone else. They 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 *not* faithful! (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 covenants. And God, who had promised to be faithful to David, had also said: 'Follow my teaching, act justly, and don't worship lies, and I'll bless you; practice injustice, worship lies, and ignore me, and I'll cast you out of your temple/garden/land, into *exile*' (Deuteronomy 32.36 etc)... sound familiar?

So Israel, like Adam, went into *exile*— this time to Babylon for 70 years. But God had *committed himself* to David and his people, and to humankind in general. So he said, "My people went down... and the Assyrian oppressed them for nothing. Now what do I get out of this... seeing that my people are taken away for nothing?... All day long my name is despised. So my people are going to know my name. On that day they will know that it is I who speak; here I am!" (Isaiah 52.4-6).

God sent the Persians to overthrow the Babylonians, and the Persians let the Jews (as Israel was now called) go home and rebuild their broken temple. Nice, but not

quite. *God's own people* still would still have to pay heavy taxes— to a pagan king! *Darius*, not God, *was lord!*

The Greeks then came and overthrew the Persians— and then built an altar to a *pig* in God's very own Temple! With Roman help, the Jews overthrew the Greeks, but the Romans turned out to be worse than all. The Jews kept trying to revolt. So, just to show how bad he could be, a year or so before Christ began to preach, Pontius Pilate crucified 10,000 Jews on the road from Jerusalem to the coast. Imagine walking on the main highway, and every 40 or 50 feet on either side there's a guy nailed to a cross, dying in agony. And you take that road, or your business dies and your children starve. *Caesar was Lord*, and you *absolutely* 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). That Word, who 'was with God and was God', 'became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.1,14): That was Jesus. And the first thing Jesus said to all the people who had seen all those crucifixions along the highway, was, 'Change your minds. *God is Lord*, not Caesar!' (Mark 1.14-15).

Crazy, for sure (Mark 3.21)! But Jesus meant business. Only, not as people expected— everybody expected God to chase all the Roman pigs back into the sea (Mark 5.9-13) and install David's son as king forever. An Anointed One (a 'Messiah', or 'Christ')— a true Son of David— would stamp the Romans' guts into the ground (2 Samuel 22.43), dash their babies against the rock (Psalm 137.9), and make the nations bring tribute *now* (Psalm 18.43-45 etc). But...

Well, Jesus *did* go around acting like God himself, healing people, forgiving their sins, proclaiming 'God's regime' (Mark 1.14,34; 2.5)— with himself as king! (Mark 14.62). But naturally, especially after he chased the businessmen out of the Temple— the biggest bank in the Roman Empire and the center of the coming Jewish revolt (Mark 11.15-16)— the rulers of his own people got together with the Romans and *crucified* this 'Anointed King' (Mark 15.25-26). After all, *Caesar is lord!* And *we'll be lord*, as soon as we can get rid of him! *Right?*

Wrong! Jesus, not the corrupt temple leaders, was that faithful Israelite that God had prepared his whole plan for, all along! According to the purpose he'd had 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 sent his only-begotten Son to 'dwell among us', to do and be all that Israel was supposed to do and

be (Matthew 3.15). God promised to respond to Israel's faithfulness when Israel was faithful, by blessing them and all the nations through them. So when this faithful Israelite 'fulfilled all righteousness' (Matthew 3.15) even unto death on a cross, 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 here's the Bible's *REALLY BIG NEWS: BY THE RESURRECTION, JESUS IS LORD, and CAESAR IS NOT!* God's regime is *here!* Even death rules no more! (Romans 6.9; 1 Corinthians 15.54).

The Bible is not a book of rules and moral examples. It's a *story*, and it's *news*: JESUS CHRIST HAS CONQUERED DEATH AND CAESAR! That's not *advice* on how to live a better life. It's *NEWS!*— Something has *happened!*

Something has happened, and it has changed literally everything. *Who is our real Lord? Caesar, or Jesus?*

We'd be wrong to think God's Good News was a religion, or 'spirituality'. There were lots of religions in the 1st century. But the Romans persecuted only Christians because Christians *scared* them. Jesus, who is *alive*, calls us to be his *new community*, indeed a *Kingdom* that will *inherit the earth* (Matthew 5.6 etc)— not by sword or gun but by the *power* of the new life God has given us, in the way we live and the kind of community we make. We're not waiting for heaven. God's new Kingdom has already broken in to the world through Christ's Resurrection. It is breaking in through us. We've been united to God's risen Messiah and now we're called to be and to do for the world what Jesus himself is and does for the world. Jesus came so we could *know God* 'as waters fill the sea'; so we could *be* for the world the *redemption* that *he* is for *us!* (Romans 12).

The rest of the New Testament is about how *we* fit in to God's plan: First, it's not just for Jews any more; *all* nations can be part of God's people now. We can accept to live by Jesus' faithfulness— we can accept his attitude towards what *God has done and is doing in him*— and be baptized (Matthew 28.19); that is, die with him, because we trust we will be raised with him (Romans 6.1-11). We can be fed with the flesh and blood of his resurrection life (John 6), and live by his Spirit. Oh, if we're Jews, we can even eat pork now (Acts 15; Galatians 5.3), because the things that once separated God's people from the nations only get in the way now, when the nations are invited to God's table too. The new mark of identity is Jesus' own faithfulness to God, which we share (Galatians

2.15-16; Romans 3.22)— and the Spirit that is his (Galatians 3.14; 4.6-7), which he gives us.

People get excited about the Book of Revelation. They want to know the future! We should know, though, that this book is really named 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' (1.1). Like all the books of the New Testament, it's about *what God has done for us*. It tells how *God's Temple was finally restored and fulfilled*. It's about what God's plan has been, all along, from the very beginning! Its point is *Jesus*, not 'revelations'!

In the end, Bible doesn't predict the future, or give rules for 'going to heaven'. It talks about the *meaning* of God's world, and of history; about the God who started over again with Abraham to bring his project of creation to the perfection he intended— and how finally did it through Jesus, his new Adam, by the power of his Spirit. It's about heaven and earth and us, ourselves, made new again (Revelation 21.1,5)— about God restoring his temple and his priest (you and me) to our true vocation.

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

So what do we want? Whose project are we part of— Caesar's, or God's?

God wants us to be the *priests* of his creation. *Christ* came to *be* that priest, since Adam had failed— and to restore us by sharing his priesthood with us at last.

It's not about *heaven*, it's about *earth*. It's not about the *end*, it's about a new *beginning*. It's not about *judgment*, it's about *rescue*. It's about *Romans 8*. Get it, and read the whole thing!

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