

# THE GOSPEL OF GOD

## Study Three

### THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD: ACTS 19–20

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#### PAUL IN EPHEBUS

Paul the apostle's ministry in Ephesus lasted three years (see Acts 20:31). Although for that time he remained fixed in the one place, the remarkable result of this ministry was that 'all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord' (Acts 19:10).<sup>1</sup> How did Paul go about his ministry in Ephesus—what did he do and what did he say—for this outcome to be brought about? What can we learn from that today?

Here is the account of what happened:

He entered the synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:8–10).

This was preceded by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon twelve disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus, and was accompanied by 'extraordinary miracles' of healing and deliverance (Acts 19:1–7, 11–12). A decisive turning point occurred when there was a Jewish exorcism that went badly wrong, as a result of which 'everyone was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised', and many believers confessed, disclosed and renounced occult practices that formerly had remained hidden, so that 'the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed' (Acts 19:13–20). It concluded with an outbreak of persecution that threatened to turn into a riot (Acts 19:21–20:1). This reminds us that the Lord Jesus was doing something particular at that time in that place (compare Mark 16:19–20), and that what Paul did then in Ephesus cannot be generalised to other times and places apart from that operational commanding of the Lord Jesus and the filling and leading of the Holy Spirit, in the saving action of the Father's kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Asia' here is not what we call the continent of Asia, but a province of the Roman empire roughly equivalent to the western part of modern Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> See Study One: 'The Gospel Spreading: Acts of the Apostles'.

Some ancient authorities read that Paul ‘argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, from eleven o’clock in the morning to four in the afternoon’.<sup>3</sup> This was probably during the siesta break, while the hall was not being used for teaching by Tyrannus. This would have been five hours a day for over two years—well over three thousand hours of teaching! With what would Paul have occupied himself and his hearers over that time?

Some time later, Paul passed near Ephesus, and asked the elders from there to come and meet with him. In his farewell address to them, Paul reviewed and summarised his ministry in Ephesus:

You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:18–21).

More detail is added here: Paul was not restricted to public teaching only, but also engaged in house to house ministry. Further persecutions are mentioned, not recorded in Acts 19 (the disturbance in Acts 19:23–41 originated from the Gentile artisans, not from Jews). We have seen that ‘repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus’ is central to the gospel ‘message’ that is to be proclaimed. Elsewhere in this address Paul describes this in a number of other ways:

the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace (Acts 20:24).

I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom (Acts 20:25).

I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

Paul alludes to what is at the heart of his gospel when he urges the overseers ‘to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son’ (Acts 20:28). He emphasises that the response to this gospel is a life and death matter, requiring repentance before the coming day of judgement, when he says: ‘I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you’ (Acts 20:26; compare Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–9).<sup>4</sup> He also warns against false teaching, and reveals some of his own emotional investment in the Ephesians’ wellbeing:

I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears (Acts 20:29–31).

All of this he summarises in these words:

I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God (Acts 20:27).

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<sup>3</sup> NRSV footnote.

<sup>4</sup> ‘So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, “O wicked ones, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life’ (Ezek. 33:7–9).

The Revised Standard Version translates this ‘the whole counsel of God’<sup>5</sup>—hence our title. This recalls these passages from the Old Testament:

This also comes from the LORD of hosts;  
he is wonderful in counsel,  
and excellent in wisdom (Isa. 28:29).

For who has stood in the council of the LORD  
so as to see and to hear his word?  
Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? . . .  
But if they had stood in my council,  
then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way,  
and from the evil of their doings (Jer. 23:18, 22).<sup>6</sup>

To impart the whole purpose or counsel of God, from beginning to end of the Scriptures, with the sacrifice of the Son of God at its heart, may well have taken Paul a full three years.

### **Questions for Discussion**

- *What were the distinctive characteristics of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus?*
- *How does this change or enhance our understanding of ‘the good news of God’s grace’?*

## **THE TASK OF THE APOSTLES**

Geoffrey Bingham describes the role of the primary apostles of Christ in this way:

They uniquely had been commissioned by Christ, then led into all the truth by the Holy Spirit, and so were able to tell of the events of Christ in the light of the Old Testament, and the teaching of the Old Testament in the light of the events of Christ.

This coming together was the formulation of the apostolic gospel, valid for all time:

Thus the truth (the apostolic truth) was something which was not as such given in the Old Testament, and not as such formulated in the Gospels. It awaited the completion of the events described in the Gospels, the coming of the Spirit, and the formation of the church . . . Thus we have the most valuable deposit of truth, which would never change. The *modes* of proclaiming it might change, and the gifts whereby it was shared might be many and varied, but the deposit would be invariable.<sup>7</sup>

This formulation of the apostolic gospel—‘to tell of the events of Christ in the light of the Old Testament, and the teaching of the Old Testament in the light of the events of Christ’—where did it come from? From no less than the risen Jesus himself, in the power of the Holy Spirit:

Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (Luke 24:25–27).

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<sup>5</sup> The Greek word is βουλή *boulē*, meaning ‘counsel, deliberate wisdom’, ‘purpose, design, determination, decree’, even ‘secret thoughts, cogitations’ (Alexander Souter, *A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, Oxford, 1916, p. 51; *The Analytical Greek Lexicon*, Samuel Bagster and Sons, London, n.d., p. 73).

<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, ‘counsel’ and ‘council’ are different words, but the principle is the same: being privy to the whole of God’s will, purpose and plan, and speaking it out as it is given to do so.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, NCPI, Blackwood, Second Edition 1986, pp. 157–8.

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high’ (Luke 24:44–49).

he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2–3).

Thus Paul was able to summarise his apostolic gospel ministry in these terms:

To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:22–23).

Constant reference to the Old Testament in the gospels, the speeches in Acts, in the apostolic letters, and the book of the Revelation bear this out. The gospel is ‘the whole counsel of God’, from beginning to the end of the scriptures, centred in the death and resurrection of Christ, with a view to the ultimate community of God with His people.<sup>8</sup>

### **Questions for Discussion**

- *How are the events of Christ and the teaching of the Old Testament related to each other in the gospel?*
- *How is this demonstrated in the teaching of Jesus and in the writings of the New Testament?*
- *What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the formulating and imparting of the gospel?*

## **THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL?**

Can the gospel ever be put in a nutshell? Geoffrey Bingham wrote:

I personally believe that teaching is the best form of evangelism. I am not convinced that extremely simple presentations of a few points with strong pressure to ‘make decisions’ is the best way to bring life to the churches and the churches to life. Even so, I believe God uses all kinds of human endeavours, often in spite of ourselves, our ideas and our methods.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> New Creation publications that seek to give expression to this are:

Geoffrey Bingham *The Things We Firmly Believe* (second edn 1986)  
*Salvation History* (1977, 2009)  
*Bright Bird and Shining Sails* (1981)

Ian Pennicook *The Story of the Acts of God* (2005)

Martin Bleby *God’s Holy Love: for Newcomers to Christian Faith* (2001).

Unpublished courses or notes include Keith Chessell’s *The Story of God* and Colin Jones’s *The Way to Human Freedom*. See also Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (1981), in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster Pr., Carlisle, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *Eager to Preach*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996, p. 13.

While not discounting the action of God to save through any presentation of the gospel, full or minimal (compare Paul's largeness of spirit in Phil. 1:15–18), he emphasises the benefit of the gospel presented as the whole counsel of God.

Geoffrey's wife Laurel Bingham was once taking a Bible study group through the 'Salvation History' course, which covered the whole of God's saving action from the beginning to the end of the Scriptures. At the beginning they were joined by a woman who had just become a believer in Christ. She later said she could not have had a better start to her Christian life than to go through the whole counsel of God in this way.

What if we don't have two or three years to tell someone the gospel? While the gospel is as large as the whole counsel of God, when we speak it we tell only a part of it,<sup>10</sup> but we must be careful not to just tell the one part only, and to tell each part in its connection with the whole.<sup>11</sup>

### **Questions for Discussion**

- *What has been our experience of simple presentations of the gospel as a few points with pressure to 'make decisions'?*
- *What has been our experience of teaching as a form of evangelism?*
- *How would we tell someone the gospel when we have only a short time to do it?*

## **SALVATION HISTORY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Two New Testament passages in particular set out a whole 'salvation history' approach to imparting the gospel. They are Stephen's speech in Acts 7, and the catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11. While both encompass something of the whole counsel of God, each one seeks to make particular points, geared to their audience. Both are addressed to Jewish constituencies, and appeal to their familiarity with the Old Testament writings. Thus they are not necessarily directly transferable to the proclamation of the gospel in a Gentile setting. Nevertheless, by becoming imbued with their perspective, we can get a feel for how it is to proclaim the gospel in particular situations with the whole counsel of God in view.

### **Acts 7:1–53**

At first sight, Stephen's speech appears to be a rather detailed survey of Israel's history, focussing particularly on the early period up to the time of Moses, and touching on the settlement in the promised land, to the time of David and Solomon, with a glance towards the exile. On the face of it, there is little specific mention of Jesus. Yet this speech, which resulted in Stephen being brutally stoned to death, should be seen in its dynamic context. It begins with the statement, 'The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham' (Acts 7:2), and culminates with Stephen seeing 'the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:55). Dominating the whole event is the risen ascended Jesus, in the position of ultimate authority in the universe, standing to attest to the truth of what Stephen is saying, and ready to welcome him. He is the one to whom the leaders of Israel—those whom Stephen

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<sup>10</sup> As is evidenced in each of the speeches in Acts—often determined by the makeup of the audience.

<sup>11</sup> Point made by Andrew Klynsmith following a talk by Philip Jensen at the AFES National Training Event in December 2004.

is addressing—remain unremittingly opposed. On his account they have seized Stephen and put him on trial. The charge against him is:

This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us (Acts 6:13–14).

We are told that this charge was brought by ‘false witnesses’ (Acts 6:13), and the charge is evidently false: Jesus never claimed that he would destroy the temple (see Mark 13:2; John 2:19), and he upheld the law of Moses (see Matt. 5:17–20). Nevertheless, the coming of Jesus as Messiah has fulfilled, surpassed and dispensed with much that was given in the Old Testament (see Matt. 5:17–20; Heb. 3:1–6), and has confronted the encrusted traditions that had grown up around it (as in Matt. 5:21–7:27; 9:10–17; 12:1–14; 15:1–20; 19:1–12; 21:33–46; 23:1–39). No doubt Stephen was being true to all that his Master had said and done and stood for. With the perspective provided by the reality of Jesus in glory at the right hand of God, Stephen could see what Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses, David and Solomon all looked to and prophesied, in a way that his antagonists, fixated on the land, the law and the temple building, could not see: the coming of the Messiah Jesus as ‘ruler and liberator’ (Acts 7:35) to deliver those still steeped in idolatry and false worship and opposed to God and His Messiah, if only they would repent and believe. Stephen points out that much of God’s presence and action took place outside the holy land, that Moses and the law were rejected by the Israelites, that the tabernacle was a movable dwelling-place for God and the temple could never contain Him. Moses, with the prophets who were also rejected by Israel, prophesied ‘the coming of the Righteous One’ (Acts 7:52), who now in like manner has been betrayed and murdered by those Stephen was addressing. Stephen’s speech is no unrelated ramble through the history of Israel, but a direct addressing of the charges made. Stephen does not hold back from saying what the other apostles (as in Acts 2:36; 3:14–15) had made clear: the frightening responsibility of the leaders for putting God’s Messiah to death, and their continued rejection of this one who, by that action, could bring them God’s forgiveness and salvation. This is infuriating for those who refuse to repent but rather desire to remain religiously fixated on the things of this world. Stephen brought this gospel to the leaders of Israel through a pointed recitation of Israel’s history, and faced the consequences.

## **Hebrews 11:1–12:2**

The catalogue of the faithful in Hebrews 11 has many points of agreement with Stephen’s speech, and brings them out even more explicitly. It too culminates in a looking to Jesus, crucified and risen, ‘at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 12:2). Embodied in him is the hope that all the Old Testament people of faith looked to with assurance and conviction while yet still unseen (as in Heb. 11:1). This one, who is ‘heir of all things’, through whom God created the worlds, who ‘sustains all things by his powerful word’ (Heb. 1:2–3), enables us to know by faith that it all came into being by the word of God (Heb. 11:3). Abel, Enoch and Noah all came into ‘approval as righteous’ from God, by faith in the promises of the God who would justify the ungodly (Heb. 11:4–7). Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Jacob, looked beyond the land they occupied to ‘the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God’ (Heb. 11:8–16). For Abraham this meant nothing less than the promise of resurrection from the dead (Heb. 11:17–19). Isaac, Jacob and Joseph faced their own deaths in a similar spirit (Heb. 11:20–22). Moses, kept by faith in the promises of God, ‘considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward’ (Heb. 11:23–29). Those who participated in the victories and

sufferings that followed through faith also testify to us of ‘Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb. 11:30–12:2)—unseen to them at the time, but known to us now. This brings it right into the present for us who also have faith in Jesus, and so are participators with them of the promised completion:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Heb. 11:39–40).

As we know our place in that great cavalcade of justified sinners, we too can be sustained in faith and witness, through whatever trials come to us (see Heb. 12:3–28).

## SALVATION HISTORY OUTLINE

It will be helpful, in the light of all we have said, to have in our own hearts and minds an outline of God’s saving action in history as testified to in the Scriptures, that in our faith-relationship with God we may know with assurance our own place in that, and testify from that to others. This outline is reproduced from the book *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures*.<sup>12</sup>

### The Creational Mandate

God created human beings in filial relationship with Himself (compare ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in Gen. 5:1–3), in a position of great authority and responsibility:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [Heb. *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth [Heb. *and over all the earth*], and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’

So God created humankind [Heb. *adam*] in his image,  
in the image of God he created them [Heb. *him*];  
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’ (Gen. 1:26–28).

This mandate amounted to filling and taking charge of the earth with the blessing which we had in our direct and intimate relationship with God, such that the whole of creation should come to be filled with the glory of God (see Num. 14:21 below).

This we refused when we attempted to take this God-given glory and responsibility to ourselves, outside of filial relationship with God (to be ‘as God’ ourselves; see Gen. 3:5).

### The Promise of the Offspring

As soon as sin came into the world, when the man and the woman gave in to the serpent’s deceptive temptation to become as God themselves, God pronounced a judgement on the serpent that included a promise of great hope for the human race:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, pp. 42–54.

he will strike your head,  
and you will strike his heel (Gen. 3:15).

There would come an offspring of the woman who would deal a deathblow to the serpent, while taking into himself and suffering the serpent's poison. This is a picture promise of what would happen in Jesus on the cross. We are told in 1 Peter 1:18–21 that this was prepared and destined by God 'before the foundation of the world'.

## **The Covenant of Creation**

On this account, it was possible for there to be a withholding of judgement on sinful human beings. Even though the flood in Genesis 6–8 was justly deserved because of the wickedness, evil, corruption and violence of humanity on the earth (see Gen. 6:5, 11), and even though none of that had changed essentially after the flood, in that still 'the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth' (Gen. 8:21), nevertheless God was still able to make this undertaking:

I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth (Gen. 9:11).

Humankind had not become any less evil, and God's holiness and righteousness had not changed, nor was God any more ready to compromise with evil or make any allowance for it, yet there was this stay of judgement. How could that be, unless God had already made provision for a final judgement of all sin and evil—in the cross—in a way that overflowed with righteous grace and mercy to sinners?

## **The Blessing of God's Righteousness**

Not only was provision made to spare human beings from final destruction, but also to bring them into great blessing:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen. 12:1–3).

Abraham was enabled to participate directly in this blessing that was to come, simply by believing what God showed him of what God would do, and accepting his part in that by faith:

And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).

This blessing was nothing less than participating in the God-bestowed righteousness of God (compare 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:6–14; Phil. 3:9; 1 Pet. 3:18; 2 Pet. 3:13).

## **The Sacrifice Provided by God**

How was this to come about, and what was to be the cost of it? Abraham was given a sense of this when God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac—Abraham's promised offspring through whom the descendants were to come. At the last moment God stayed Abraham's hand:



But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided’ (Gen. 22:11–14).

What is God getting excited about here? The not withholding of an only son (see also Gen. 22:16)! What is Abraham excited about? The Lord providing the sacrifice (see also Gen. 22:8)! Put these two together, and what have we got? Ever thereafter, Isaac and his descendants would have known that they lived only by virtue of that substitute sacrifice provided by God—as do we.

## The Ruler of the Peoples

The offspring promised to the woman in Genesis 3:15, identified in Genesis 12:1–7 as the offspring of Abraham (compare Gal. 3:16), was further shown to Abraham’s grandson Jacob to be a ruler of the tribe of his son Judah:

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
until tribute comes to him [or until he comes to whom it belongs];  
and the obedience of the peoples is his (Gen. 49:10).

As in the promise to Abraham, this ruler will relate to all the nations.

## I Have Given It for You

Meanwhile, God gave to Israel a unique sacrificial system of worship which continually made the point that sin must be atoned for, at the cost of lifeblood. In contrast to all human attempts at religion or appeasement to gain the favour of the gods, this God-ordained provision made clear that the true and effective atonement comes from God, not from ourselves:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life (Lev. 17:11, RSV).

## The Earth Shall Be Filled

Just as God had blessed and commanded the human race in the beginning to fill the earth and take charge of it with the blessing they had with Him as God’s image and likeness, so God made it clear, even in the midst of our sin and disobedience, that this original purpose of His would prevail:

as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD (Num. 14:21).

This glory of God will be humanity fully alive (as in Rom. 8:19–21).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second century AD, wrote: ‘*Gloria Dei vivens homo; vita autem hominis visio Dei*’ (‘The glory of God is humanity fully alive; but the life of humanity is seeing God’).

## The Charter for Humanity

To David, Israel's king from the tribe of Judah, God made a further far-reaching promise of an offspring, intimately related with God, who would reign for ever:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established for ever (2 Sam. 7:12–16).

For such a one to reign for ever would require him to have dealt with the issue of death. David, awed and humbled by the magnitude of this revelation to him, saw the universal implications of what God was showing him when he responded:

So this is the law [or charter] for humanity, O Lord GOD! (2 Sam. 7:19; literal translation<sup>14</sup>).

## God's Anointed Messiah

The career and destiny of this offspring of the house of David is spoken of in Psalm 2:

I will tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to me, 'You are my son;  
today I have begotten you.  
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel (Ps. 2:7–9).

Elsewhere this 'rod of iron' is referred to as 'the rod of his mouth' and 'the breath of his lips' (Isa. 11:4)—the word of command that he speaks.

To this one is given the place of ultimate authority next to God, both in the warfare against God's enemies, and in the worship of God's people:

The LORD says to my lord,  
'Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies your footstool' . . .  
The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind,  
'You are a priest forever  
according to the order of Melchizedek' (Ps. 110:1, 4).

He will share the very nature of God Himself, and will bring a reign of peace, justice and righteousness:

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,

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<sup>14</sup> See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, 'The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity', in John H. Skilton, ed., *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honour of Oswald Thompson Allis* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., USA, 1974), pp. 295–318.

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onward and forevermore.  
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isa. 9:6–7).

## The Righteous One, My Servant

How can there be peace, if wickedness is still on the earth? The wicked must be removed. How can anyone be left for this kingdom of peace, if we are all wicked, and justice and righteousness are executed on us? To this one is given a unique role from God: to bear the sin and to die the death of the wicked, while never succumbing to wickedness himself, to free and heal us all:

Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:4–6).

Consequently he comes with a message of deliverance, joy, and restoration:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory (Isa. 61:1–3).

This is for all who humbly trust in God:

But this is the one to whom I will look,  
to the humble and contrite in spirit,  
who trembles at my word (Isa. 66:2).

## In a Single Day

As the time of fulfilment draws near, what this one will accomplish is spelled out ever more precisely:

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place (Dan. 9:24).

What is required of those who will benefit from it, is also made clear:

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;  
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;  
it will surely come, it will not delay.  
Look at the proud!  
Their spirit is not right in them,  
but the righteous live by their faith (Hab. 2:3–4).

Vast as the dimensions of this task are, no less will be the totality and decisiveness with which it will be carried out:

I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day (Zech. 3:9).

On that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity (Zech. 13:1).

No less, also, will be the fearful cost of such an action:

‘Awake, O sword, against my shepherd,  
against the man who is my associate,’  
says the LORD of hosts.  
Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered;  
I will turn my hand against the little ones (Zech. 13:7).

(See Matt. 26:31 and Mark 14:27, when Jesus cites this verse to characterise what God will do in the action of the cross; compare John 15:1–4).

## God With Us to Save His People

So, ‘when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son’ (Gal. 4:4):

‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,’  
which means, ‘God is with us’ (Matt. 1:20–23).

The night before he died, Jesus signified the meaning, purpose and outcome of his death:

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the [new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’ (Matt. 26: 27–29).

On the way to the cross, Jesus applied the fearsome prophecy of Zechariah 13:7 to himself, with its subsequent scattering and gathering:

Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,  
“I will strike the shepherd,  
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”  
But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee’ (Matt. 26:31–32).

What this action meant for Jesus personally, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is beyond computation:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:45–46).

This was the one, of whom John the Baptist truly said:

Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29).

## **The Power of God for Salvation**

None of this happened by accident. This worst of human crimes, for which we are fully responsible as a human race, was at the same time God’s great action of love for us:

this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power (Acts 2: 23–24).

This is what has made it possible ‘that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations’ (Luke 24:47):

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:42–43).

## **The Word of the Cross**

This saving gospel centres on what God has done in Jesus on the cross:

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement [or, a propitiation] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:23–26).

This has ramifications for the whole sinful world:

in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:19).

It also makes its personal impact:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19–20).

## Where Righteousness Is at Home

The final outcome is assured:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25–27).

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

Thus will we be fitted for what God has for us in the age to come:

in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home (2 Pet. 3:13).

## Worthy Is the Lamb

In the book of the Revelation, a vision is given of a scroll, the unfolding of which releases all the final judgements and actions of God in history. The search is on for one capable and worthy of handling such an enormous moral responsibility. One is found, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who appears as a Lamb who has been slaughtered, and is now standing alive. To him is sung this song:

You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God  
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,  
and they will reign on earth . . .  
To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever! (Rev. 5:9–10, 13).

### ***Questions for Discussion***

- *What impact does this view of salvation history have on us?*
- *What would we include in an overview of salvation history, and what would be its central reference point?*