

SESSION 9: UNDERSTANDING SALVATION

In our last session, we saw that God in his infinite wisdom has merged together his 'rescue operation' for fallen humanity with his 'human program' of qualifying Man for royal status. It is in this way he is fulfilling his 'creation project' and for all eternity.

Therefore, to view the Bible solely as a 'rescue operation' is to miss the point of the story of the Bible altogether! This error is further compounded when we interpret God's rescue operation in the context of a 'heaven and hell' narrative. I am not saying that heaven and hell don't exist; what I am saying is that heaven and hell do not define the Story of the Bible. It is not the central narrative, and to make it so is to veer well off course! In fact, the Old Testament had no clear concept of heaven and hell. The Sadducees, for example, a respected Jewish faction within the ruling religious elite, didn't even believe in an afterlife (Ac 23:6-8)—so focused were they on God's kingdom on earth!

Jesus, too, did not make heaven and hell the center of his teaching—far from it. He taught the coming of the 'Kingdom of God'—the rule of God on earth. In fact he taught his disciples to pray that God's kingdom would come, that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Lk 11), and that those who do God's will, the meek, will inherit the earth (Mt 5)!

So unless we view the Bible from a 'creation project' perspective, we will very quickly veer off course and miss seeing the vision of the glorious climax of God's creation project. We will miss seeing what John saw in Revelation 21 and 22. We will miss understanding the heart of what Jesus was proclaiming throughout his ministry and what the true gospel message is all about!

Therefore it is important that from the beginning, we establish a correct understanding of salvation. We have to take salvation out of the heaven and hell narrative in order to properly understand what salvation truly is! And when properly understood, salvation means the full restoration of God's purpose and plan—the full realization of God's 'before the world began' dream!

The illustration for salvation we have so often used has been a Roman one. It has been one of a benevolent Roman citizen, who, at a Roman slave market, purchases a foreign slave and—rather than enslaving him to his household or business enterprise—sets him free! The slave has been purchased with a price. He has been redeemed at a cost and has now been set free. In this illustration, however, the slave has been set free to be free—to go back, perhaps, to his family and home country from where he had first been taken captive!

But in the Bible Story, God has not set us free just to be free, nor even to take us back to where Adam left off prior to his fall. The Bible says that Jesus, with his blood, has purchased us for God. In Revelation 5:9 and 10 John, speaking of Jesus, says "...you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation." He goes on to say, "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

There is a definite purpose for which God has saved us. We have been set free for a far more noble cause than just being set free to be free!

Let's take a look at a more complete and accurate illustration for salvation. Moving from a Roman illustration to a Jewish one, take a look at Exodus 8:1:

"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "This is what the Lord says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me"—or 'serve me' as many translations have it, such as the KJV, ESV, and Amplified translations. The Hebrew word used here means both, and of course true worship is service and true service is worship.

Israel or the Hebrew people were brought **out of** slavery in Egypt to be God's special people to serve him. But they were brought out—not as slaves, in the same way they served Pharaoh—but to serve God as sons. Exodus 4:22 says, "This is what the Lord says: 'Israel is my first-born son,'" and he goes on to say, "Say to Pharaoh, 'Let my son go so that he might worship or serve me!'" Israel was set free from Egypt to become God's special people to serve God, or we could say, to **'live a life on mission with God as his special missionary people to all the other peoples or nations of the world.'**

So, to review the backstory. Following the fall, Abraham and Sarah were to be the new Adam and Eve. Through Abraham and Abraham's family, God was getting his 'creation project' back on track! The operative word in the Abrahamic covenant is the word 'bless' — "I will **ble**ss you and all peoples on earth will be **ble**ssed through you." (Gen 12:2-3)

The word 'bless' connotes the 'enabling of God' to fulfill all that God had purposed and planned, to achieve the full realization of God's creation project! Bless meant, to Abraham and his family, exactly what it meant when first given to Adam and Eve in Gen 1:28 when God, in commissioning them, blessed them so that they could be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth, subdue it, etc.

Only following the 'fall' is God's 'rescue operation' now included in that 'blessing.' Blessing now becomes heavily redemptive, but still means the fulfillment of all that God has purposed and planned from before the world began; it means nothing more and nothing less!

This now brings us to another very important point and that is the issue of election: being chosen or elected by God!

Perhaps many of us have incorrectly believed that election means elitism. Now we would never say it like that, but there has been a long standing belief that this, in

fact, is the case! For example, the Bible says in John 3:16 that "God so loved the world..." a verse we love to memorize and quote and rightly so! When reading the Old Testament, however, there's the thought that God 'so loved Israel', in a rather exclusive way and he either, at worst, hated the other nations and, at best, was indifferent to them. But in the New Testament, because of what Jesus did through his death and resurrection, God had a change of heart and now he 'so loves the world.'

Of course, this can never be. God never changes. Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not human...that he should change his mind..." (See also Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17.)

The fact is that God has always so loved the world. In fact, we could say that in the Old Testament, God so loved the world that he gave Israel. "Through you," God says to Israel, "all the nations on earth will be blessed!" The election of Abraham and Abraham's family (Israel) was so that, through them, God could express his love for the whole world – all the nations of the world. Israel was taken from the nations for the nations! Israel was to serve God as his first-born, but not his only born—"all nations on earth will be blessed through you." And through Jeremiah God says, Israel was holy to the Lord, the first-fruits of his harvest (Jer 2:3).

So, Israel was the first-fruits, but the harvest was to be all the nations of the world.

And this is what election really means! Election means God choosing a people to co-labor together with God in kingdom endeavors. As we have seen so clearly in previous sessions, this has been God's way of working from the very beginning. God made Adam and Eve in his likeness and image, for the very purpose of engaging them in his creation project, to extend Eden over the entire earth. God has never abandoned this 'modus operandi' of working with Man to see his purpose accomplished. God's election of Abraham and Abraham's family to work with him, as he did with Adam and Eve, is perfectly consistent with the way God has chosen to work from the very beginning.

Only now, as a result of the 'fall,' working together with God involves a redemptive dimension: it includes the 'rescue operation.'

Furthermore, we see this exact same 'modus operandi' flowing seamlessly from the Old Testament into the New. In the New Testament we have the very same words, 'election', 'chosen,' or the phrase, 'God's elect.' The definition for these words or phrases is perfectly consistent with how they are used in the Old Testament. Those who are now 'in Christ,' both Jew and Gentile, are the elect of God, that is, chosen to be God's children to worship and serve him, or to worship him through serving him, as was the case with the nation of Israel.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Or as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, that we have been reconciled to God, in Christ, and have been given the ministry of reconciliation. We are Christ's

ambassadors – God is making his appeal through us! Or to use our preferred phrase, we have been called, chosen, elected, to ‘live a life on mission with God.’

We really have not been saved just to be saved. Salvation doesn’t mean this. We have not been chosen just to be chosen. Election doesn’t mean this. We have not been set free just to be set free. Redemption doesn’t mean this. It’s not just what we have been saved from (as important as this is) but what we have been saved for, that really, really matters!