

SESSION 16: WHAT IS THIS NEW TESTAMENT AGE ALL ABOUT?

Christ's kingdom—or as we discussed in session 14, we could say, God's future world (new creation)—has broken in through Christ's death and resurrection, into this present age. Broken in, but not yet come in fullness! This New Testament age is what theologians refer to as the 'now but not yet' age of Christ's Kingdom or New Creation.

So, what then is this 'now but not yet' age all about? What is God doing in this interim period that we refer to as the New Testament age or the Church age?

Interestingly, this New Testament age was not clear in the Old Testament. The prophets of old thought that the coming of the Messiah and the full realization of God's Kingdom was one single event. Isaiah 61, for example, speaks of the Messiah's coming, the proclamation of the good news, followed immediately by the day of vengeance of our God or final judgement. Also, Isaiah says in Isaiah 42, 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim'—What, good news to people? No, rather—'justice to the nations,' an event that we now know follows Christ's second coming.

It is no wonder then that in the apostles' time, people were perplexed about why Christ's Kingdom, in fullness, had not immediately appeared, or at the very least, why Christ had not already returned following his (in their minds) very brief departure. "Where is this coming he promised?" they asked, to which Peter responded in 2 Peter 3:4.

In fact, this idea of the first coming and second coming of the Messiah was so foreign to the Jews, that this is one of the reasons why they reject Christianity to this day

Paul, in particular, addresses this issue. In Ephesians 3, Paul says, 'This mystery'—that is, this New testament/Church age mystery—'was made known to me by revelation'—so, not from Old Testament teaching. Paul confirms this by going on to say, '...which was not made known to people in other generations, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets' (Eph 3:1-3).

Paul also explains the **purpose** for this New Testament/Church age and it is very revealing. He says, and listen carefully, 'This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are **heirs** together with Israel, members together of one body, and shearers, (or partakers) together in **the promise** in Christ Jesus' (:6). The promise, of course, is 'the inheritance' that we discussed in Session 13.

So, the New Testament age is not only about the Gentiles being blessed with the gospel, but also about those gentiles who do become believers being granted equality with Jewish believers as co-heirs in God's Kingdom.

Nelson's New Illustrated Commentary says this about verse 6: 'The Old Testament predicted that God's grace would come to the Gentiles'—making reference to Genesis 12:2-3. They then go on to say—'but equality with the Jews in one body was a secret (or a mystery) never before revealed.'

So, this helps us to understand why the Jewish followers of Jesus had such a difficult time, at first, accepting Gentile believers as having equal standing with them in the Messiah's Kingdom.

Jews and Gentiles 'in Christ', according to Paul, have equal share—they become co-heirs/inheritors of 'the inheritance.' The Inheritance as we have seen is 'adoption to sonship', 'entering into God's REST,' to rule with God as his heirs over God's new creation, which will be fully realized at Christ's second coming.

With this in mind, we now understand just how vitally important this New Testament age is to the full realization of God's end-vision and for all eternity. In fact, Paul references the importance of this age in 1Co 10:11 by sayings that it is the 'final age of all the ages.'

So, the New Testament is beginning to make a lot more sense, is it not! And what becomes very clear about the New Testament is that God has a very distinct two-fold program going on, and each part of this two-fold program is indispensably connected to the other:

Let's look at God's two-fold program in more detail. The first part of God's New Testament program is that he is redeeming a people from all the nations of the world and calling them into his kingdom. John describes this in John 10:14-16, with Jesus saying that he, Jesus, was the good shepherd, that he lays down his life for his sheep and that he had '**other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.**' That is, not of this Jewish sheep pen that he was, at that time, working in. '**I must bring them also,**' Jesus said (referencing the Gentiles), '**They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.**' (Paul speaks of the same idea but uses the metaphor of 'one body' 1 Co 12:13).

So, one flock, one shepherd, one body—Jew and Gentile In Christ!

John again addresses this in the Book of Revelation, for example, in Rev 5:9 John says, 'And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you **purchased for God** persons from every tribe and language and people and nation..." Or, we could say

from every 'sheep pen', every people group, on the planet, to be one flock, one body, one chosen people. For what purpose? Well, John goes on to say in the following verse, 'You have made them to be a kingdom and priests (or as the New Living Translation puts it "a kingdom of priests") to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'

So, this hint, by John, of the eternal purpose of God's chosen people then leads us to **the second part** of God's two-fold program for this age, and it is this: **To prepare and mature his redeemed, chosen people for their role in God's future world, when the 'not yet' comes to fullness.** The metaphors for this part of God's New Testament purpose are numerous: A body growing (Eph 4:16), a child maturing (1Pe 2:2), a building being constructed (1Pe 2:5), a race being run (Heb 12:1), a bride making herself ready (Rev 19:7), a priesthood in preparation (Rev 5:10) and the list goes on!

And for what purpose, we might ask? Well, the body is growing **for work**, the child is maturing to **be an heir**, the building is being constructed **for God's habitation**, the race is being run to **cross a finish line and to win a prize**, the priesthood is being prepared **for service**, the bride is making herself ready for **marriage**, for the **marriage supper of the lamb**.

As we saw in Session 9, salvation is not just a 'one time event' – it's a journey that encompasses God's two-fold program for his chosen people. The Children of Israel is our example of this. Their salvation consisted of a journey that involved deliverance from Egypt, transformation through the wilderness, and obtaining their inheritance through possessing Canaan, the Promised Land.

Just as their salvation in its totality, was a journey, so is ours! Peter refers to Christians as pilgrims, (1 Pe 1:1 KJV). Redemption, as wonderful as it is, is just the first step towards 'The Inheritance' promised! Redemption is not the race completed. Redemption simply qualifies us to enter the race and to begin running! Remember, it's not just what God has saved us from but what God has saved us **for** that is important to God!

Our salvation journey begins with deliverance from bondage to sin and becoming a 'new creation,' in Christ. We continue to grow into the statue of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13) and be increasingly transformed, little by little and more and more, into his likeness. We 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling' (Phi 2:12).

The goal is not sinless perfection, for James says we all stumble in many ways (Ja 3:2). But it does mean that any sin committed is 'sin seen in the rear view mirror' as opposed to 'driving intentionally and knowingly towards it.'

And our salvation journey concludes by obtaining the inheritance—our promised land which Peter says is reserved for us in heaven (1 Pe 1:4). Remember the inheritance is not heaven, but is reserved for us in heaven. The inheritance is ruling and reigning with Christ in God's new heavens and new earth, of which crowns and thrones are symbols of (1Pe 5:4 and Rev 3:21).

Now we come to this most important point of this session, often overlooked by many and sadly, not understood by most Christians. It is God's 'master plan.' A breath-taking stroke of divine genius. So, are you ready for this?

God, in his infinite wisdom, has combined these two parts of his agenda into one! The gathering of a chosen people from all the nations of the world, together with the preparation and maturing of his people for their inheritance in God's new world. One becomes the means of achieving the other.

Engaging his people with him on mission, to the peoples and the people of the world, is God's way of transforming and maturing us. We could use an old saying that 'God is hitting two birds with the one stone.'

The **stone** that God throws is to engage his people with him on mission.

Bird number one is, he gets people saved from every tribe, language and nation. That's why he said to us to, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," (Mk 16:15). (This we traditionally refer to as 'the Great Commission,' and the metaphors Jesus used for this part of his program are such metaphors as fishing and harvesting.)

Bird number two, by engaging his people with him on mission, God gets his saved people, perfected or matured, for eternity. Through living a life on mission with God, we learn to lay down our lives, take up our cross, deny self, and be yoked to the Lord. We learn to follow Jesus and obey him. Remember what Jesus said in Jn 10:27, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.' When we listen to and follow Jesus' voice – we will always be led into some meaningful expression of mission, either directly or indirectly!

Let me repeat a favourite saying by one of our 'fathers in mission' Don Richardson, who loved to say, "Let's keep the main thing the main thing." Living a life on mission with God is the main thing, and every local church therefore ought to be missional by facilitating God's people into a life on mission with God! The Great Commission is a two-edged sword—it cuts both ways, or we could say it blesses both ways. Firstly, it is a blessing to the unreached and to the unsaved, as they get to hear the glorious gospel. And secondly, it is a blessing to us, because through engaging with God on mission, the wheels of our transformation begin to turn, we are conformed

more and more into the image of Christ, and our race to the finish line, and the prize, the inheritance, gets ever closer!