

Foundations for studying the end times – the redemptive plan

1. Introduction

- a. God is a master story teller and the plan of redemption is the most masterful story ever created. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible is a narrative – an account of connected events; a story. Far more than a collection of commands, moral principles, spiritual guidelines, examples of obedience, or ethical targets to aim for, the Bible is a sacred story. Story in its most basic form includes setting, plot, conflict, characters, and resolution.
- b. For too long much of the church has looked at the Bible as a collection of books – a library. The problem with this is that we can select each book at random without placing it into the storyline of God.
- c. The key to understanding the main themes of the end times is to know the foundations of the biblical story and how they set up the end of the story. When we watch a movie the end of the movie is the logical conclusion of the story. The story prepares you for the dramatic conclusion and the conclusion makes sense of everything that has gone before. Ultimately the conclusion is the most important part of the film as it resolves the conflict and reveals what the whole story has been about. The same is true of redemptive history.
- d. Our ability to fully grasp the redemptive story depends on our understanding and knowledge of the whole Bible and especially the Old Testament. In the Old Testament we find the promises and covenants that are foundational to the redemptive story. Once we understand these foundations we can see how Jesus fulfils God's redemptive plan, how we are to live in light of what has been fulfilled, and what remains to be fulfilled.

2. Promises and covenants

- a. God's promises are the specific commitments He has made and which He is fulfilling through the redemptive story. Covenants are agreements God has made with His people that include terms, conditions and promises. Biblical covenants show us how God relates to His people and set the conditions for how He will fulfil His promises and how the redemptive story will conclude.
- b. The promises God has made have the following characteristics:
 - i They are made by God and secured by Him. Human sin does not eliminate the promises – they are unconditional
 - ii These promises have not yet been fulfilled but they must be before the end of the age. God's honour is at stake in the fulfilment of these promises
 - iii Jesus secured these promise but He has not yet fulfilled them
 - iv These promises will all be fulfilled at the end of the age and are all interconnected
- c. Hence, to be able to study the end times, we need a greater understanding of these promises. These promises declare a specific, positive future for Israel and the nations that God has committed to bring to pass. Human sin disrupts these promises and causes delay and causes individuals to lose their participation in these promises. However, because these promises are guaranteed by God they are not jeopardised by human weakness, failure and sin – God will perform everything He has promised.

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- d. God has also not chosen to fulfil His promises in isolation. He is going to fulfil them in partnership with His people and the mission of the church down through the centuries has set the stage for their fulfilment.

3. Setting the stage

- a. Genesis 1 to 11 sets the stage for God's plan for world redemption. We see how sin and tragedy were introduced into the human experience and God's commitment to redeem His creation.
- b. In the early chapters we see how humanity's sin destroys families, sons are murdered and wickedness escalates so quickly that God releases a global flood to stop the growth of human wickedness. There is no man on earth who can redeem humanity. From the beginning it is apparent the earth needs a new leader, a new man, to redeem and restore the human race.
- c. Even though this flood was a recent memory man still decided to set up a challenge to God's authority by building a tower to access spiritual power that would allow them to challenge the One who had flooded the earth. God stepped in and separated the people by confounding their language and thus began the story of the nations of the earth.
- d. In Genesis 11 we see that these men were trying to avoid being scattered:

Genesis 11:4 *Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."*

- e. Although this was judgement due to man's rebellion God has always had a promise of redemption. In Genesis 3 He promised a Seed or offspring.

Genesis 3:15 *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."*

- f. The nations who have been scattered will become a beautiful part of God's plan; a plan that began in Genesis 12 when He chose one man to become the father of a nation He would use for the redemption of the nations.

4. God's covenant with Abraham

- a. God began His redemption of the nations with a covenant made with Abraham. This covenant is the foundation of the gospel because its success is guaranteed by God and not by Abraham.
- b. The Abrahamic covenant is the origin of Paul's conviction that the good news of the gospel is righteousness by faith.

Romans 4:3 *For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."*

- c. Abraham believed God and God counted it to him as righteousness. In a sense, both Jews and saved Gentiles are descendants of Abraham because he was born a Gentile and yet also became the father of the Jewish people. His life is a picture of how both Israel and the nations must come to salvation and, thus, Paul identifies Abraham's covenant as the basis for the gospel:

Galatians 3:16-18, 29 *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make*

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the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise..... And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

- d. These promises in the Abrahamic covenant undergird the story of redemption and throughout the biblical narrative we see the prophets predicting their fulfilment and, at the same time, wondering how God will ever bring these promises to fruition. The New Testament authors marvel at how Jesus' death and resurrection becomes God's means of securing these promises
- e. In Genesis 12 we see God giving shape and definition to His redemptive plan by calling out Abraham and giving him very specific promises:

Genesis 12: 1-3 *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. And 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 him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

- f. In this passage we see three very distinct promises:
 - i The promise of descendants - Abraham will have descendants who will become a righteous nation
 - ii The promise of the land – those descendants will permanently inherit a land as a righteous people
 - iii The promise to the nations – the nations will come into great blessing and salvation through this process
- g. These three promises become the foundation of God's mission in the world and are reiterated throughout the biblical narrative. Paul told the Galatians Abraham received the essence of the gospel in Genesis 12.

Galatians 3:8 *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."*

- h. Throughout the Old Testament we see the deep longing of the people for these promises to come to pass. We hear the prophets crying out their predictions that a day is coming when God will fulfil these great promises. One of the great tensions of the Old Testament is how God is going to accomplish what He has said considering the condition of Israel and the nations.
- i. The prophets begin to describe the fulfilment of these promises in very apocalyptic terms. They repeatedly portray a time coming that is far beyond any other time in history.
- j. Once we understand these three promises and God's commitment to fulfil them literally, key themes in the Bible and of the end times begin to make sense.

5. A Divine King

- a. In 2 Samuel 7 God's plan for the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham become more specific through God's unique covenant with David.

2 Samuel 7:12-16 *Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. ⁹ And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all*

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your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

- b. Like the covenant with Abraham there were no conditions to this covenant and God said it would stand forever. As part of this covenant God promised David that He would bring the Jewish people into their full destiny as a people and that they would dwell in the land securely and peacefully.
- c. The reigns of David and Solomon were golden years for ancient Israel but during that time God still promised a future time when He would plant them in the land without any enemies. We see, as we look at the Old Testament prophets, there is a great emphasis on Jerusalem and the throne, focussed on David's covenant as the solution for Israel's crisis.
- d. The future fulfilment of Abraham's promises are now directly connected to the promised Son of David – a coming King. This is the Old Testament foundation of Galatians 3:16

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings", referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring", who is Christ.

- e. The promises made to Abraham will be fulfilled by the Man whom God has chosen. The Messiah and Abraham's promises are inseparable because the covenant made with David is a continuation of God's covenant with Abraham. When God made covenant with David, He revealed He would accomplish His promises through the rule and reign of His King. Because this King will reign forever, the promises are secure.
- f. Paul makes it clear that the promises made to Abraham ultimately belong to a specific Man, a specific "offspring" of Abraham. That offspring is Jesus as referenced in Genesis, 2 Samuel and Galatians:

Genesis 3:15 *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

Genesis 12:7 *Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.*

2 Samuel 7:12 *When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom.*

Galatians 3:16 *Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings", referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring", who is Christ.*

- g. The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled through the single offspring Jesus. Jesus alone can secure the destiny of Jews and Gentiles. He alone is the One in Abraham's lineage who is righteous and, therefore, can administrate God's promises.
- h. God has given one Man dominion over Israel and the nations. He will fulfil all of Abraham's promises by His sacrifice (first coming) and by His judgements (second coming). Both are required for Jesus to complete Abraham's promises. (Isaiah 53:1-11; 63:1-6)

6. A New Covenant

- a. The Abrahamic covenant not only finds its fulfilment in a coming King but also in a new covenant. This new covenant does not replace the covenant made with Abraham but enables Abraham's covenant to

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be fulfilled. The new covenant is a corporate agreement between God and His people that resolves the Mosaic covenant (by providing deliverance from sin) and fulfils the promises made to Abraham.

- b. The new covenant is declared in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel;

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah**, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Jeremiah 32:40-41 ⁴⁰ I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. ⁴¹ I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

Ezekiel 16:60,63 ⁶⁰ yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant..... ⁶³ that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD."

Ezekiel 36:26-28 ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

- c. When she comes into the new covenant Israel will be saved forever and permanently dwell in the land as God's holy people. This is the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. If God is this committed to the first two promises He made to Abraham then He is also committed to the third promises to the nations.
- d. The new covenant will do what the Mosaic covenant never could – secure God's promises to Abraham, to Israel and finally to the nations.

Hebrews 8:7-11 ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. ⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

- e. In the New Testament we see the full expression of this new covenant. Through Jesus' death and resurrection the covenant is secured and, by His blood, relationship is restored not by our righteousness but by God's own righteousness and faithfulness.

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- f. The new covenant is not just about the salvation of the nations – this covenant was made with Israel to fulfil the covenant made with Abraham and we, as gentiles, are brought into this covenant as we are grafted into the covenants and promises God made with Israel and specifically with Abraham.

7. Salvation to the nations

- a. When God began the redemptive plan with Abraham, He intended to bring salvation to the nations.

Galatians 3:8 ⁸ *And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed."*

- b. The nations were not an afterthought because Israel had failed in her covenant calling. God made covenant with Abraham in order to save the nations. Each time Jesus commissioned the disciples, He sent them to the nations:

Matthew 24:14 ¹⁴ *And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*

- c. As the gospel of the Kingdom is proclaimed in the nations so it will produce a mature church – a bride “without spot or wrinkle or any such thing ... holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27) The end of the age is when the church comes to maturity and is ready to be joined with Jesus forever. The end time church will be deeply loyal to Jesus and live with great anticipation of His return.
- d. It is hard to grasp all that was in God’s heart and mind when He gave Abraham the promise to bless the nations but God’s glory will be revealed as Israel comes into her full destiny and the mature church arises to partner with her Bridegroom.

8. The gospel of the Kingdom

- a. In Matthew 24 Jesus declares that “**this** gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world and then the end will come” This statement is made in the context of Jesus’ teaching on the end of the age in Matthew 24 and 25. We have to understand that this gospel is intended to prepare the church for Jesus’ return.
- b. The early church understood that the gospel of the kingdom was about a King who was not just a spiritual leader but also the rightful Ruler of the earth who is coming to sit on a real throne in Jerusalem who will fulfil all God’s promises and destroy everything opposed to God’s purposes.
- c. This gospel is to be proclaimed as a witness to His coming. Like an ancient herald would enter the city and announce that the king was coming and the city needed to be prepared so we are called to proclaim the coming King and instruct the earth on how to be prepared.
- d. The first century church understood this. They prepared the church for Jesus’ return and warned the nations that Jesus was coming with His judgements. We need to understand the main themes of end times because part of the task of missions is preparing the nations for these events. God is too kind to allow the events of the end times to begin before the nations are warned and prepared.
- e. The reason we want to study God’s plan is not so we can grow in knowledge but so that we can understand what God has said and engage with it and cooperate with Him. We want to get to know Jesus better and grow in intimate relationship and ever deeper love with Him. As we study the end times we see aspects of who Jesus is that we do not see elsewhere.

- f. We also want to gain understanding so that we can partner with God in His mission. The more we understand the better we can partner with Him and prepare for the days ahead – days of power and glory unlike anything we've ever seen.

9. Conclusion

- a. To understand the redemptive story is to make sense of the world in which we now live. The issue of Israel and Jerusalem has become a global issue with nations across the earth taking interest in, and making statements about Israel and Jerusalem. There is no natural reason for this focus. Jerusalem has no natural significance in the earth and there is no logical reason why Jerusalem and Israel should be a global issue.
- b. The growing storm around Israel and Jerusalem makes no sense apart from spiritual realities. There is something much greater going on than what we see in the news. What is unfolding is part of a bigger story and the Bible tells us where that story is going and how it will be resolved.
- c. Although we do not know exactly when these events will unfold we must recognise that we live in the first generation in human history when these events are possible. This must affect how we study the Bible and how we prepare the Bride and the nations for what is to come.