

## What does the Bible Say?

### Lesson 5: God's Plan – A seed of hope

By now, you might be realizing how we've all contributed to our world of sin and broken relationships. Without God's power and guidance, we've become slaves to sin (John 8:34), including self-honor, fear, shame, social standards, and competition. Our sins and choices have hurt our relationships with people and with God. If we're honest with ourselves, we recognize our shame and feeling of distance from our Father and our need to be restored to him because sin separates us from our God (Isaiah 59:2). Because God is love, he cannot sin or associate with sin or anyone who sins. Yet, because God *is* love, God still loves us and has always had a plan to restore us to himself. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has "set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (NIV).

Discuss what this verse means. When did you first begin wondering about God? Did something in your life reduce that desire? Describe what you've been experiencing or feeling during these studies.

From birth, God created your mind and heart to be curious about God, death, eternal life, the spiritual world, and your soul. When we nurture this part of our hearts, our quest to know God begins to burn like an unquenchable fire because God is eternal! We can never know everything about him; and yet the more we learn, the more we want to know! Our hearts also long for love, but as we've been learning, true love is found through our relationship with God. We might already be wondering what it would be like to experience the Father's full love, plans, purpose, and direction for our lives. Perhaps we're getting excited to be a part of his amazing eternal glory and plan, much more than seeking our own! As you've been choosing love over sin this past week, you've just begun tasting God's purpose and special plan for you: to set you free from the slavery of sin so that you can choose to love him and others freely by *his* power!

<sup>19</sup> Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. <sup>20</sup> When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. <sup>21</sup> What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death!... <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:19-23)

How have you felt like a slave to sin? How did it feel choosing love this week instead? Give examples.

#### God's Plan of Love in the Old Testament

As we've already seen, God's plan for mankind began in the Old Testament. Written between 1500—400 B.C.E., the Old Testament reveals that God is looking for men and women who will devote their hearts and lives to him. After Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, they have children who continue to sin, just like their parents to the point that God is deeply grieved that he made man (Genesis 6:6). Over two thousand years later, God sends a flood across the earth to wipe away the people he created, and yet he saves one man Noah and his family because of Noah devoted himself to righteousness and walked faithfully with God (Genesis 6:9). A few hundred years later, we see God honoring the man Abraham

for his great faith (Genesis 15:6), for Abraham was willing to give up his own son when he believed that this sacrifice was God's desire (Genesis 22). God promises Abraham to make him the father of nations (17:4) through his descendants, and God fulfills that promise through Abraham's grandson Jacob. God gives Jacob a new name "Israel," meaning "he strives with God," because Jacob had great passion and hunger for God's blessing (Genesis 32:28). Through Jacob's descendants, God gives birth to a chosen people whom he also calls "Israel," and is later known as the Jewish people. In Jeremiah 31:9, God says, "I am Israel's father," and in Hosea 11:1, he calls Israel his child and son.

Historically, the people of the Near East were continually at war with one another, and murder was a simple way to resolve a conflict. While strict law codes did exist in neighboring territories,<sup>1</sup> the Jewish people had no such law code for themselves until the time of their leader Moses (c.1500 B.C.E.). At that time, God's people were living in slavery under the Egyptians and suffering under a harsh legal system where they had no rights. Through Moses, God rescues his people to bring them into a land he calls the Promised Land. On a journey through the desert toward this land, God teaches his children how to be devoted to him through a Jewish law code: a set of religious, moral, social, and ceremonial laws. Through these laws, God could teach them obedience and trust in his guidance. He promises his people success, provision, protection, favor, and blessings if they obey, and he promises to stay with them forever if their hearts are devoted to honoring him. God is also able to demonstrate his faithfulness and love to those who love him and keep his commands and justice toward those who disobey (Deuteronomy 7:7-12).

The Old Testament laws were a system of pure justice: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, with strict punishment for disobedience. God wanted his people to see that their sins were not just against people or their community, but also against him, their holy, loving Father who cared for them. We see in Joshua 7:20, a man named Achan [AY-kin] sins during a war and declares, "Truly, I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel." Later, when King David (c. 1000 B.C.E.) commits adultery, he responds in the same way: "I have sinned against the Lord." He also required animal sacrifices of rams, goats, and lambs to demonstrate in a physical way that sin causes spiritual death. God also used these sacrifices to demonstrate true justice – that sin requires reparation, or payment: life for life. Yet God also showed his children mercy by allowing the people to offer an animal for payment rather than their own lives.

How do you think God wanted people to feel and respond when they sacrificed animals for their sins?

Consider our current justice system. What happens when someone commits a crime? Why is reparation, payment, or punishment required? Why can't the judge simply offer forgiveness?

As God used laws to teach his people justice, he also use them to show his mercy. In this way, people could learn the difference between what they deserved and God's unearned compassion. This is why Paul says, in Romans 6, <sup>23</sup> "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." God's mercy is a gift that we can never earn or deserve because of our sin. We deserve death! And sometime people in the Old Testament did die because of God's justice. Many times, God even allowed other countries to invade and discipline his people. Yet, throughout the Old Testament, we see God rescuing his children from ongoing punishment. We might imagine that all this discipline would produce stronger children. But God's punishment, deliverance, and animal sacrifices didn't change the hearts of his children. After they were rescued, they soon returned to a life of sin and neglect of God's commands. The Old Testament stories reveal how man cannot overcome sin on his own or restore by himself the honor God deserves. Without

<sup>1</sup> Examples include the Babylonian Law of Hammurabi in c. 1750 and the Hittite Law Code c. 1650-1500 B.C.E.

God's divine help, eternal punishment outside of heaven was their only destiny. By 400 B.C.E., God had stopped speaking to the people through prophets, a period of Silence that persisted for almost 400 years. Then something happened that changed everything! The promised Messiah was born in Israel.

What do we learn about the nature of man through the Old Testament? Why do you think good deeds, sacrifices, and works can never save us from sin and put us in a right standing with God?

Do you think people today have the same attitude that God has about sin? Explain. How have you been growing in your understanding of sin through these studies?

### God's Seed of Hope

While man on his own can never overcome sin or do enough to earn our God's mercy and forgiveness, our heavenly Father never leaves his children without hope. Beginning in Genesis 2, God speaks of a seed, an offspring of Eve, who will crush the adversary of his children. We saw in Zechariah 8 that the seed will bring blessing to Israel and allow God's Presence to be with his people always (8:12-13, 23). In Isaiah 57, God promises his children, "<sup>16</sup>I will not accuse my people forever. I will not always be angry. <sup>18</sup>I have seen their way of life, but I will heal them." Isaiah 61 is a prophecy written in 700 B.C.E. about the good news that this seed will bring to God's people:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness the prisoners...<sup>2</sup> to comfort all who mourn...<sup>3</sup> to [give] them... a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor...<sup>6</sup> And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations...<sup>7</sup> Instead of disgrace, you will rejoice in your inheritance. And so, you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours...<sup>11</sup> For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. (1-11)

What promises and hope does the Savior want to give us? Underline what you see!

Isaiah talks about a garden causing seeds to grow. From this passage, what do you think the Garden of Eden symbolizes? Based on what you know about the Seed, who are the "seeds" in this garden?

This seed has many names throughout the Old Testament: rock, capstone, stone, ruler, servant, the Branch, the arm of the Lord, child, and Son. While Israel is continually referred to as God's son, this Son is a ruler and Savior for God's people. He comes from God to rescue his people from sin, free them forever, and bless them with joy! Psalm 2 (c. 1000 B.C.E.), speaks about this Son:

### Psalm 2:6-8

"I have installed my king on Zion,<sup>2</sup> my holy mountain." <sup>7</sup>I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. <sup>8</sup>Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

<sup>2</sup> Zion is a biblical symbol for Jerusalem, as well as God's eternal kingdom.

What do we learn here about God's Son? What title and power is he given?

The prophet Micah (700—800 B.C.E.) also speaks a prophecy about this Son:

**Micah 5:2-4**

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah [EH-frah-thah],<sup>3</sup> though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."<sup>3</sup> Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.<sup>4</sup> He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach the ends of the earth.

Where will this Son be born? What do we learn about his origin? What titles and power is he given?

God says that the rest of Israel's brothers will join the Israelites. Who do you think this is talking about?

The prophet Isaiah (700—800 B.C.E.) also prophesies about this Son:

**Isaiah 7:14**

Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

How will this Son be born? Do you remember what *Immanuel* means? (Hint: see Zechariah 8:23)<sup>4</sup>

**Isaiah 9:6-7**

<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. <sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

What titles are given to this Son in this verse? What is the relationship between God the Father and this Son?

We learn that this Son will be a descendant of David and a continuation of his kingdom. How long will this kingdom endure? What then is the major difference between David and the Son?

The Old Testament contains over 350 prophecies about the coming Savior written over 400 years before the birth of Jesus and preserved within 200 to 350 years of his birth. Throughout the New Testament, written within the adult life of Jesus's friends and first followers (c. 6 B.C.E.—30 C.E.), we see the fulfillment of all these prophecies in Jesus. When we truly understand prophecy in the Old Testament, we

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<sup>3</sup> An ancient name for Bethlehem.

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 8:23: <sup>23</sup> This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" See also Lesson 1.

begin to see the hope of Jesus throughout every book! The records of these works provide archeological evidence proving Jesus to be the promised Savior and Son. In the New Testament, we learn that Jesus was born in Bethlehem through the virgin Mary (1:26-33) in a family who descended from the line of David (3:23-31). Jesus refers to God as his Father and calls himself God's Son (Matthew 11:27), the Messiah (John 4:25-26), and the "good shepherd" (John 10:11). He claims to be an eternal being (John 8:58) with authority over heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18), an authority equal to God's with the ability to judge and receive the same honor (John 5:22-23). We will see in a future lesson how Jesus's death is even described in a specific prophecy in Isaiah. Jesus also read Isaiah 61 to the Jewish people at the temple in Jerusalem and said about himself, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled" (Luke 4:21).

Who do you believe Jesus is? Do you have any questions about who he is?

### **The Remnant of Israel: God's True Children**

Throughout the Old Testament, we see a theme of God continually rescuing a "remnant," or remaining group, of his people from eternal punishment. We see many stories of God leading this remnant into a promised land or secure territory, as a reflection of the former pure and protected Garden of Eden. These promised lands were physical symbols of an eternal place where the remnant of God's people will one day reside – a people described in Zephaniah 3:

<sup>9</sup> "Then I will purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him shoulder to shoulder.... <sup>11</sup> I will remove from you your arrogant boasters... <sup>12</sup> But I will leave within you the meek and humble. The remnant of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord. <sup>13</sup> They will do no wrong; they will tell no lies. A deceitful tongue will not be found in their mouths. They will eat and lie down, and no one will make them afraid.

God promises in the Old and New Testaments that this remnant will include both Jewish and non-Jewish people, also called Gentiles. They will be a people of all nations, as we learned in Isaiah 61. When we read both the Old and New Testaments, we see that Israel is a physical symbol that represents all God's children who will one day gather in the eternal promised land of heaven, an eternal Garden of Eden: "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9). Now, that's good news!

Do you want to be one of God's chosen children? If so, how does he want you to live?

Homework:

- Continue asking the Lord to help you overcome sin and choose love instead.
- Consider how you can show love to God this week. Read one chapter a day from a New Testament book, and write what you learn. Take time to express your heart to God over all that you are learning and how you feel about his forgiveness and love for you. Express how you feel about him! If you have time, go to a special place to pray. Worship the Lord at a church, and think of other creative ways you can show love to God!