



# **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE MISSION OF GOD**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As I reflect on my years of church attendance and involvement in the children and student ministries, I never remember any teaching on God’s mission apart from the Great Commission in the New Testament. It wasn’t until my sophomore year in college at Union University I experienced the overall picture of God’s redemptive plan laid out through Scripture. I was in the class “Becoming a Global Christian,” taught by Roger Glidewell, where we were required to read the book ‘Unveiled at Last’ by Bob Sjogren.

For the first time in my life, I came into contact with the truth that from the beginning of Scripture until the end, God has been unfolding His plan of redemption. This book was a great launching pad for what I would call the beginning of my journey in thinking and preaching God’s grand narrative of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. Over the years, I feel as though I have grown in my theological understanding of the mission of God from reading books, studying Scripture on my own, and attending seminary. It is in this essay I will seek to lay out my biblical theology of the mission of God.

## **CREATION and CURSE**

The story of God begins in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” We learn that the universe, the earth, and humanity find their origin in God. At their inception the created order was perfect. Man was not only perfect, but was special since they were created in the ‘*Imago Dei*’ (or the Image of God). Genesis 1, as Dr. Ashford asserts,

“Centers on and pays the most attention to man and woman,” which ends in God saying his creation was ‘very good’. God instilled in man some of his characteristics and attributes. Having been fashioned in the image of God man would be moral, relational, eternal, and purposeful beings. Their purpose was to be in relationship with God, as well as with others, and reflect his glory.

Glorifying God for man would be wrapped up in their relationship with him and in their obedience to His commands. Genesis 2 gives a more detailed account of the relationship between God and man. God had given the command to “be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth.” However, the most critical command God gave was in regards to the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They were not to eat from this tree, “for the day they eat of it they [would] surely die.” Genesis 3 introduces the serpent who carries on a dialogue with Eve, which leads to her deception. Eve, after succumbing to the temptation, turns around and hands the forbidden fruit to her husband. At the moment of their disobedient taste test they both realized they were naked and sought refuge from the Lord.

At this point, the author turns from the perfection of creation to the curse of both creation and humanity. Humanity has now been tainted due to the man’s rebellion and disobedience to God. As Dr. Ashford states, “As a result (of the rebellion of man), God’s good creation is marred by the ugliness of sin, and that sin has a far broader impact that we might typically imagine.” Here a pattern is established that will be repeated throughout scripture in the unfolding plan of God’s redemption. This pattern is sin, judgment, and grace. Over and over we will see man’s sin, God’s judgment, and God’s imparting of grace.

### **SIN, JUDGEMENT, and GRACE: THE PATTERN THROUGHOUT SCRIPTURE**

This pattern of sin, judgment, and grace will be seen throughout Scripture. Grace is found in verse 15. Many refer to this verse as the ‘protoeuangellion’, which is the ‘first gospel.’ Here God

promises to redeem or reverse the curse of humanity through ‘the seed of the woman.’ This seed will be seen later in the context of God’s covenant with Abraham and be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. One could say that Genesis 3:15 is the beginning of the mission of God as it so relates to God’s desire to redeem and reconcile man back to himself, where they will worship Him as Creator and (now) Redeemer.

Grace is also found in verse 21, God clothes Adam and Eve’s nakedness with animal skin. God so loved and had affection for Adam and Eve that He did not leave them in their shame and nakedness, but provided covering for them. This foreshadows and points to the role sacrifice, namely ‘blood sacrifices,’ will play throughout the story of redemption.

Blood sacrifice is highlighted in Exodus 12 where the Passover lambs were slain in order for the death angel to pass over the firstborn of Israel. Passover would become a major celebration for Israel every year in remembering the grace of God that passed over Israel’s firstborn. It was with Israel God instituted the sacrificial system as a tutor that would teach Israel that sin has not been fully dealt with and that an ultimate sacrifice would need to be made to remedy the curse of humanity’s sinfulness. This ‘blood sacrifice’ would be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Jesus was the God-man, the perfect sacrifice to be made ‘once and for all’ for the sin of the whole world. Jesus fulfilled the foreshadowing of the animal sacrifice of Genesis 3:21 and the sacrificial system of Israel.

From Genesis 4–11, sin has escalated to the point where God wants to destroy the earth that once was marked by perfection. Man has alienated himself from God, becoming an enemy to God. Rather than being fruitful, multiplying and subduing the earth, man is gravitating to one place and working to make a name for themselves. Again, the author of Genesis has painted a canvas to describe the corruption of man, as well as, the sinful inclination man’s heart. It is no longer slanted towards obeying the commands and ways of God, but slanted against and in

opposition to the commands and glory of God. God in an act of judgment goes down to the city and confuses the language of the people. The confusion of the language in Genesis 11 leads to the creation of different tribes, tongues, nations, and ethnicities and disperses them throughout the earth.

### **COVENANT: THE METHOD BY WHICH GOD WORKS TO REACH MAN**

Once again, the pattern of sin, judgment, and grace emerges in Genesis 11 and 12. God's grace is displayed by initiating a relationship with a pagan, sinful, and ordinary Gentile named, Abram. In Genesis 12:1-3 God says 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 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 dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Later in Genesis 15 and 17 God will enter into an official covenant relationship with Abram and change his name to Abraham. God enters into a covenant with Abraham in order to use him and his ancestors to reach the 'families of the earth.' Paul, in Galatians 3:8, will refer to God's covenantal promise with Abraham as the gospel: "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.'"

The covenant God establishes with Abraham is of utmost importance, especially in understanding and grasping the theology of God's mission. God establishes with Abraham his plan in reaching the nations. Therefore, what will follow Abraham is a history of God's redeeming work in the fallen creation. The Abrahamic covenant is reaffirmed in to both Isaac and Jacob. Genesis ends with Joseph bringing his whole family, including his father Jacob, to Egypt. It is in the historical account of Joseph one sees the providential hand of God working in redemptive history. God uses Egypt to preserve the nation of Israel, who at the end of Genesis has

around 70 people. At the beginning of Exodus, we read that Israel is numbering in the multitudes. Israel had so many people that the Pharaoh begins to practice genocide by killing the firstborn. The people of Israel react to this event by crying out, where God hears their cry and remembers the covenant with Abraham.

This is the context in which the calling of Moses takes place. God calls out Moses and tells him that he will be the vessel by which He will work mightily and deliver the children of Israel and bring them to the place where they will worship Him. After the exodus out of Egypt, God brings them to the mountain He had promised Moses, where He enters into covenant relationship with Israel. The key verse that gives valuable insight into the theology of God's mission is Exodus 19:5-6: "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

This verse highlights the missional nature God placed within the covenant he made with the Israel. They were to be God's treasured possession, a possession that existed for the purpose of God. Not only that, but they were to be a kingdom of priests. Interestingly, the priesthood had not been implemented. Priests would be the mediators of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel. Therefore, for God to share with Moses that Israel, by nature, would be a 'kingdom of priests,' shows the role of mediator that Israel would play between God and the other nations. The nations would be on the heart of God throughout the Old Testament.

## **JESUS, THE NEW COVENANT, AND THE CLARITY OF GOD'S MISSION**

I have spent quite a bit of time developing the theology of God's mission within the Old Testament. As missiologist David Bosch states, "The Old Testament is fundamental to the understanding of mission in the New Testament." Bosch does point out that, "There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross

geographical, religious, and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh.” While I would agree with that sentiment in general, the Old Testament clearly speaks of the desire and affection God has to make himself known among the nations—not to mention the sending of Jonah to the Nineveh.

Nevertheless, God’s mission does come alive in the New Testament through the person of Jesus Christ. He is the climax of God’s redemptive history, the fulfillment of the prophecies and promises made, the solution to bring redemption to the fallen world, and the authoritative voice declaring God’s love for the nations.

Jesus is the crescendo of God’s symphony of redemption. Jesus was the God-man, who was fully God and fully man, who became the ‘blood sacrifice’ for all of mankind. His substitutionary atonement on the cross was the work needed to forgive the sins of mankind and to give them a new heart—a new nature. Jesus in Luke 19 states, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” His work on the cross is validated by his resurrection. Jesus now becomes the means that God will use to reconcile himself to the world. Those who do not place their faith in Christ are under the judgment and will one day—if they die in their unbelief—face the wrath of God. But, salvation will be found in no one else other than Jesus Christ.

During the life of Jesus, he spent three intense years ministering around the region and mentoring his twelve disciples. Jesus mentored and taught these men about the nature of who he was (that he was the Son of God), his purpose in coming (to seek and to save the lost), and what he wanted them to do (take this gospel to the nations). He also trained them in ministry, service, discipleship, and kingdom living. It would be these men he would entrust with taking the gospel to the nations.

After the resurrection, Jesus spends forty more days teaching and preaching on the kingdom of God. Prior to returning to heaven, the eleven disciples gather with Jesus on a

mountain in Galilee where Jesus gives them (what is referred to as) ‘The Great Commission.’” Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus commands his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. . . .” Luke records in his gospel account, after the resurrection, Jesus’ conversation with a couple of His disciples where He explains,

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 and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled... Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the death, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47)

In both of these passages, Jesus brings clarity to the mission of God. And with the account in Luke, Jesus directly connects his life, ministry, and work specifically to Old Testament thought, theology, and mission.

Therefore, there is a renewed and more complete vision of the global mission of God in Jesus life, ministry, mission, and command. Bosh refers to this clarity as a paradigm shift from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Jesus’ command is to take the good news of God’s salvation and kingdom, which is only found in Christ, and take it to the nations. As John Stott points out, evangelism must be given priority. Matthew 24:14, Jesus says, “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.” Evangelism will culminate in the ‘gathering of worshippers’ unto God from all tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations.

In Colossians 2:25-28 Paul shares with the church that he was made a minister according to God “to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.” Paul continues to say, “To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” To Paul, the mystery he addressed was God’s acceptance and desire to be in

relationship with Gentiles. Therefore, God made Paul “a chosen instrument of his to carry his name before the Gentiles. . . .”(Acts 9:15). Paul elsewhere talks about this mystery in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians. It would seem by Paul’s language and explanation that God’s mission can be seen in the Old Testament, albeit dimly, but it is brought to full light at the coming of Jesus.

The book of Acts is a wonderful example of how the church embraced, with passion and intentionality, the mission of God. With the blood of Jesus, the Spirit of God, and the command to go, the church becomes an unstoppable force to carry out the mission of God. Luke, the author of Acts, writes with a progression in mind. In Acts 1:8, once again, the mission to go to all nations with the gospel is repeated, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Luke will trace for us, from Acts 2–28, the progression of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Acts 17:6 is one of my favorite verses in the book of Acts. It is found in the context of Paul and Silas ministering in Thessalonica. The gospel had been spreading like wildfire and radically changing people to the point where one who opposed the gospel said, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also. . . .” I like to think of the moment Adam and Eve sinned, they turned the world upside down, due to their sin; but it is the gospel that turns the world right-side up.

### **THE RULE AND REIGN OF GOD**

This is precisely what the mission of God is all about; bringing man back to right relationship with him, that they might live under the rule and reign of God and worship Him as the one and only supreme God of the universe. As Bosch states it, “The reign of God is undoubtedly central to Jesus’ entire ministry. It is, likewise central to his understanding of his own mission.” I would

also add that the theme of God's kingdom is also seen throughout Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Submitting to God's rule and reign is what we must teach our people today. Much of the New Testament consists of teaching believers what it looks like for the rule and reign of God to be present and evident among his covenant community. God's mission under His kingdom rule has two partners: word and works (*Christian Mission in the Modern World*, pg 45). God's mission for the New Testament believers involved both evangelism and social activity.

God's mission involves us being, as Jesus said, both salt and light. In order to be fully engaged in God's mission, John Stott will argue, one must be active in both evangelism and social activity. Engagement in both will fulfill the Great Commission, as well as, the Great Commandment: "to love our neighbor as our self." Stott also states,

We are sent into the world, like Jesus, to serve. For this is the natural expression of our love for our neighbors. We love. We go. We serve... True, the gospel lacks visibility if we merely preach it, and lacks credibility if we who preach it are interested only in souls and have no concern about the welfare of peoples' bodies, situations and communities" (*Christian Mission in the Modern World*, pg 47).

It would also be helpful to quote from David Bosch in his engagement with the Gospel of Matthew as it relates to mission being both evangelism and social activity:

For Matthew, then, being a disciple means living out the teachings of Jesus which the evangelist has recorded in great detail in his gospel. It is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple. Discipleship involves a commitment to God's reign, to justice and love, and to obedience to the entire will of God. Mission is not narrowed down to an activity of making individuals new creatures, or providing them with 'blessed assurance' so that, come what may, they will be 'eternally saved'. Mission involves, from the beginning and as matter of course, making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognize injustice, suffering, oppression, and the plight of those who have fallen by the wayside. It is unjustifiable to regard the 'Great Commission' as being concerned primarily with 'evangelism' and the 'Great Commandment' as referring to 'social involvement' (*Transforming Mission*, pg 81).

In conclusion, the mission of God is all about gathering a people unto God, from every nation, tribe, and tongue, to worship him, as well as, submit to his rule and reign in their lives. In

order to do so, believers will evangelize and proclaim the good news of Christ, not only with their lips, but also with their lives.

## **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED**

Christopher Wright, the author of *The Mission of God*, refers to the book of Revelation as God's covenantal declaration that the mission has been accomplished. Revelation is not only a book about eschatology but is also a book that highlights his faithfulness in fulfilling his promises and mission. First, Revelation highlights God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth because the current one has been damaged due to the sin of man. Revelation 21:1,4 says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...for the former things have passed away." Even the apostle Paul alludes to the yearning creation has for redemption in Romans 8:19-22,

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

Second, the author highlights in Revelation 5:9 and Revelation 7:9 how God has fulfilled his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. Revelation 7:9 says, "After this I looked, and behold, 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." Also Revelation 21 highlights how these nations will be God's people and he will be their God. Now, the nations for all eternity will worship and glorify God, as well as, submit to his rule and reign. Once again, this has been God's desire ever since the beginning—prior to the fall of man. And it was the omnipotent gracious God who sovereignly worked in creation to bring salvation to the nations.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

The Bible is the grand narrative, the grand story, of the mission of God. God's narrative of his mission begins with a utopia, is damaged by the rebellious man, is redeemed in the person and work of Christ, and will one day be fully restored at Christ's second coming. It is Jesus who also brings clarity and authority to God's mission (Gen 12:1-3) by commanding his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. In the end, the book of Revelation displays how God will have worked out his grand plan to accomplish his grand mission: to restore and redeem a fallen world, judge the wicked, and gather to himself a people for his own glory.

It is imperative that believers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century regain the confidence and enthusiasm the 1<sup>st</sup> Century believers possessed when it comes to the mission of God. They went out boldly, many times in the face of persecution and opposition, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. As John Stott rightly points out, "Nothing hinders evangelism today more than the widespread loss of confidence in the truth, relevance and power of the gospel. When this ceases to be good news from God and becomes instead "rumors of God," we can hardly expect the church to exhibit much evangelistic enthusiasm."(*Christian Missions in the Modern World*, pg 63). Developing and embracing a biblical theology of God's mission which is rooted and clearly seen throughout Scripture, will aid in a resurgence of confidence and enthusiasm as it relates to the church being the vehicle to fulfill God's mission.