God's Revelation Through Time

Making Bible reading more meaningful

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When I first became a Christian I began to have a growing desire to read the Bible and to know more about God through His Word. As I was in the habit of doing with any other book, I would open the Bible and begin at the beginning with Genesis 1:1. And just as I did when reading other books, I started with the assumption that the words in the Bible were intended to communicate clear, straightforward thoughts – without any secret codes or hidden meanings. I interpreted the ideas expressed in the Bible just as I was in the habit of understanding the meaning of any other written text. Without realizing exactly what I was doing, I was using a natural, reliable approach for interpreting the message of the Bible. God communicated His Word using plain, normal human language which we should take at face value. This straightforward approach helped me to avoid many pitfalls in accurately understanding God's message in the Scriptures.

As a new believer in Christ, I was eager to read God's Word and apply it in my life so that I could grow spiritually. I was familiar with the traditional Christian chorus which goes like this:

> Every promise in the book is mine,
> Every scripture, every verse, every line.
> All are blessings of His love divine,
> Every promise in the book is mine.

As I began to read my Bible as a new Christian, I initially assumed that any of the truths or promises I encountered during my devotional reading were equally available to be appropriated directly in my life as a child of God. But I would often come across passages that I simply could not reconcile with what I knew to be true about life as a Christian during the time since the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. There were occasions when I would find myself being confused about certain events or about some of God's dealings with certain people in the past. I realized that every promise in the book was not necessarily mine, and I began to reexamine my approach to reading and understanding the message of the Bible.

One of the most helpful principles I started to learn when reading God's Word is that God revealed His message to mankind a little at a time over an extended period of human history. I began to see that God was progressively implementing His eternal plan for His creation in different stages during different periods of time. This idea revolutionized my Bible reading. As I would read the Bible from start to finish, I began to see that God had dealt with different people in different time periods in different ways as He was unfolding His eternal plan for His creation. I began to understand that the intended meaning of any Bible passage was determined by its context. This meant not only a passage's grammatical context, but also its historical context in God's revealed plan for the ages.

The apostle Paul clearly affirmed the value and benefit of all Scripture when he said, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). But this passage does not mean that all the directives and promises of Scripture are intended for me to apply directly to my life today. For example, originally God provided only plants for food (Gen 2:16), so for hundreds of years until God’s post-flood instructions to Noah (Gen 9:3) steakhouses and BBQ restaurants would not have been sanctioned by God. Another example is that today those who worship God are no longer required to make an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feasts, such as was mandated for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament (Deut 16:16). But during the future Millennial Kingdom that pilgrimage to Jerusalem will again be required of both Jews and Gentiles (Zech 14:16). As another example, even though the sign gift of speaking in tongues was evident during the founding of the church, there came a time in church history when the revelatory gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge passed away and were no longer active (1 Cor 13:8-10). These examples and many others help us to understand that, even though the character of God does not change, He is free to design the outworking of His plan for His creation over time in any way He desires.

In reading the Bible we can trace God’s plan through history, starting with His creative act which brought our universe into existence. The first two chapters of Genesis reveal how God created the universe in an orderly and purposeful way. There is no hint of random chance mutations or the survival of the fittest over a period of millions of years. God’s creation came into being fully formed and with the appearance of age, all of which was accomplished according to His pre-ordained plan over a period of six physical days each of which had an evening and a morning. Our original parents (Adam and Eve) were placed into an ideal environment created for them, and they were able to freely fellowship with their Creator in that world.

Unfortunately they fell prey to the temptation to take something for themselves that God warned them not to seek. Instead of faith in God and obedience to His Word, they chose disobedience, independence, and autonomy. God had foretold the consequences of their actions when He warned them, “you will surely die” (Gen 2:17), but they chose to ignore God’s Word. Their sinful choice caused the entire creation to suffer corruption, and their original innocent nature was twisted and bent toward evil. Death and decay entered the world and became the norm from that time forward (Gen 3:14-24). But even at that dark moment in human history God revealed that there would be a future hope for redeeming and restoring creation through one of Adam and Eve’s descendants (Gen 3:15). The remainder of the Bible describes the historical development of God’s sovereign plan which would lead to the ultimate goal of salvation and restoration for all of humanity.

Since the time of Adam and Eve’s Fall, each of their descendants inherited the same corrupt sin nature that characterized their parents (Ps 51:5; Rom 5:12). The depths of this sin nature is clearly illustrated by Cain’s murder of his brother and by Lamech’s murderous boasting (Gen 4). By contrast, there were some individuals who expressed faith in their Creator, including Seth, Enoch, and Noah. Generally, though, each generation continued to descend to greater depths of sin and corruption. During the days of Noah, “the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”

(Gen 6:5), and that “the earth was filled with violence … for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth” (Gen 6:11-12). God made a covenant with faithful Noah (Gen 6:18) to preserve him through the worldwide flood that was coming as a consequence of the depth of human depravity at that period in history. God was ensuring that the hope of a redeemer, who would be “born of a woman” (Gen 3:15), would be kept alive through Noah.

As the biblical narrative continues, though, it becomes clear that even such a momentous act as rebooting humanity from a single “righteous man, blameless in his time…[who] walked with God” (Gen 6:9) could not quash the sin nature that infects humanity. Generation followed generation, with human depravity continually on display through such events as the powerful dominion of Nimrod (Gen 10:8-12) and the defiance against God expressed at the tower of Babel which resulted in God’s division of human languages (Gen 11:1-9).

We have seen, though, that throughout the early history of mankind there were individuals who remained faithful to their Creator. Another of these people was Job, who lived around the time that would make him a contemporary of the patriarchs. He is described as a man who “was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil” (Job 1:1), but that description does not imply that Job was somehow free from his fallen nature so that he was sinless. It simply meant that, despite their sin nature, such individuals were trusting in their Creator and in His promised redemption, while doing their best to live in obedience and dependence on God. They responded to God in the way that Adam and Eve should have responded – with faith, dependence, and obedience. Since they still possessed a sin nature, the sole basis on which they could be considered “righteous” was their faith and trust in God. A right relationship with God has always been based on faith in God’s faithfulness, rather than in anything that a fallen human being could do to attain righteousness.

Even from the earliest Bible times, the concept of a “redeemer” was commonly understood. A “redeemer” is someone who does something for you which you cannot do for yourself. Job certainly believed this and clearly proclaimed, “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see and not another” (Job 19:25-27). His statement reflects his future hope for redemption, resurrection, and restoration. Job and all of the faithful followers of God believed in His promise.

It was around this same time in human history that God began to work on behalf of another individual who would prove to be devoted to God despite all of his own weaknesses and sins. At that time God spoke to a man named Abram who was living in a worldly and idolatrous culture at a place called Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:31). God would make sweeping promises to Abram which would guarantee that the hope for a redeemer born of a woman (Gen 3:15) would be fulfilled in the future through one of Abram’s descendants. And God would begin to do something new through Abram that He had never done before.

In the past, individuals like Abram had exercised faith in God and sought to live according to the standard of His holy character, even though their progress was limited and hindered by their fallen nature. But God’s covenant with Abram (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-18; 22:15-18) contained promises which extended far beyond any personal blessings that he himself would

receive. God made promises that created an expectation for future fulfillment spanning hundreds of years after God changed Abram's name to Abraham and after he himself had passed into the presence of his Creator. The everlasting Abrahamic Covenant would be continually affirmed and clarified over the course of biblical history, with benefits which would impact all the families of the earth in the future.

God's ***personal*** promises to Abraham included such things as: 1) God's special care and provision during Abraham's life; 2) God would ensure Abraham's great reputation and name; 3) God would use Abraham as a channel of blessing to others around him; and 4) God would give him a physical heir by his wife Sarah. As we continue to read about the events of Abraham's life we see that God fulfilled every *personal* promise to Abraham literally during his lifetime. Abraham was given land, servants, cattle, silver, gold, and a son by Sarah (Gen 13:2; 24:34-35; 21:2).

Beyond the scope of Abraham's own lifetime, though, God had also promised to multiply his physical descendants through Sarah in order to build a great nation. This was something that God had not previously done. These ***national*** promises included: 1) their perpetual existence; 2) the land of Canaan would be given as an everlasting *national* inheritance; and 3) God's covenant with Abraham would continue to be honored with the nation, despite disobedience and failure on their part.

God made the ***universal*** promise that blessings would be available to all mankind in the outworking of His plan through Abraham. As we will see, this becomes extremely important later in biblical history. God had even foretold that Abraham's descendants would be strangers in a foreign land where they would be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years (Gen 15:13), and these things happened exactly as God had revealed them in the events surrounding the lives of Joseph (Gen 34; 40-50) and Moses (Exod 1-14).

After the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt, God began to fulfill the *national* promises He had made to Abraham by forming the Israelites' *national* identity. He declared them to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" who would "be My own possession among all the peoples" (Exod 19:5-6). God set Israel apart as His own nation, and He used Moses to record detailed laws and ordinances which dealt with all areas of their personal, spiritual, social, and national life (Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy). When they were gathered at Mount Sinai, all of the people agreed to take on the obligation to fulfill everything the Lord commanded them to do, making the Mosaic Law a bi-lateral covenant between God and the nation of Israel. Positive consequences were promised for faithful obedience, while negative consequences were promised for apostasy and disobedience.

Initially the new nation was guided by faithful men like Moses, Joshua, Caleb, and the judges that were raised up periodically by the Lord (Judges 2:18). Under their leadership the Israelites began to conquer the land which God had promised to them. Samuel was the last of the judges, and toward the end of his ministry the people demanded a human king to rule them. Samuel knew that this was not God's desire, but God instructed him to do what the people wanted (1 Sam 8). King Saul ruled the people before David was anointed to succeed him as king over Israel.

Even in the midst of political intrigues and despite the personal sinfulness of King David, God confirmed His promise to Abraham that “kings will come forth from you” (Gen 17:6). God revealed to David that “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16). King Solomon followed in his father’s footsteps, as did King Rehoboam and the other hereditary Davidic kings who succeeded them. Even after the northern tribes of Israel rebelled and separated from their brothers, the kings that were descendants of David would continue to rule.

When the nation was first established God had warned the Israelites that sin and disobedience on their part would result in tragic consequences (Deut 28, 30). One of the consequences for national disobedience was that they “will be torn from the land where you are entering to possess it. Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth” (Deut 28:63-64). The Bible books of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles cover the history of the monarchy in Israel, and they display a deepening cycle of apostasy over time. It was during that period when the prophets of Israel were raised up to warn the nation of imminent disaster and to call the people to repentance.

The prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea were active in the northern kingdom until the time when it was conquered and scattered by the Assyrians in 722 BC. In the southern kingdom the prophets Joel, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk were active until its conquest and exile by the Babylonians in 586 BC. During the Babylonian exile the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were active in calling Israel back to their God. Their prophetic messages included the guarantee of restoration and glory for Israel in the future when they would return in faithfulness to their Creator.

As the biblical prophets spoke about their coming Messiah and Redeemer, the bulk of their words concerned the future triumphant reign of the Messiah as King. But their message also included details about the suffering and rejection of their Redeemer. For example, Isaiah wrote:

> He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. (Isa 53:3-6)

The Jews found the prophecies of Messiah’s suffering difficult to reconcile with those concerning Messiah’s triumphant rule over the nations, and this caused them to speculate that there would be two different Messiahs. The truth is that there is only one Messiah, but the different aspects of His ministry would take place at two different times in human history. In God’s eternal plan for the salvation of mankind, Messiah’s first coming would be as the Redeemer, while His second coming would be as the triumphant Ruler. One scholar has said, “Among the data concerning Messiah in these references is the stunning fact that He comes both to reign irresistibly and to suffer vicariously. This then involves not one coming but two. … [T]he mission of Jesus is one

work in two phases."[1] As we read the Bible it is important to understand this distinction so that passages which describe Messiah's first coming in humility are not confused with passages concerning His second coming in glory.

Israel's prophets also provided hope for overcoming humanity's inherent sin nature through regeneration and power of the Spirit of God working within each believer. For example, the prophet Ezekiel wrote:

> For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:24-28)

These promises were echoed by the other writing prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah. They also revealed that the blessing of regeneration was not for the Israelites alone, but the promise of regeneration was available for believing Gentiles as well. For example, Isaiah 49:6 says:

> It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

Isaiah's words guarantee that the fulfillment of the "blessing" aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant would apply equally to all people who put their trust in God.

During the time between the last Old Testament prophet and the beginning of the New Testament, there was a period of about 400 years during which the nation of Israel remained scattered and subjugated to a succession of Gentile nations including Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome (Dan 2 & 7). A portion of the Jewish people had returned to their land and their Temple had been rebuilt, but they continued to live in subjugation to the Gentile powers. As the New Testament begins, there is a logical continuity with what had been revealed previously. Old Testament revelation of the covenants and promises had created reasonable expectations for their fulfillment during the period covered by the New Testament. As the birth of the Messiah is announced, the angel declared, "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:32-33). This statement flows directly from the covenant promises to Abraham which were awaiting fulfillment in the Messiah.

As we read the narrative of the life of Jesus we see that He lived a completely righteous life in fulfillment of the requirements of the Mosaic Law. He was the only person who could have done

[1] Paul Henebury, *The Words of the Covenant: New Testament Continuation* (Sojourner Press, 2024), 59, 61.

this because He was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20) and did not have a sin nature (Heb 4:15; 1 John 3:5). By living a righteous life Jesus proved that He was qualified to serve as the spotless “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29; 1 Pet 1:19) through His sacrificial death on the cross for all of mankind. It is interesting to notice that when John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God he did not mention Messiah’s right to rule as King. Christ’s first coming focused on His vicarious sacrifice as Redeemer, rather than on His triumphant rule as King which will happen upon His return.

The Old Testament had ended with the unfulfilled expectation that God’s promised Messiah would establish His kingdom upon the earth. He would be a descendant of King David who would regather the faithful nation of Israel and restore them to their promised land. This is what the Jews were awaiting as they chafed under the heavy hand of Roman rule. When John the Baptist began his ministry he had preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2). Jesus started His public ministry by proclaiming exactly the same message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). A little later Jesus sent out His disciples, instructing them to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matt 10:6-7). King Jesus was then present in their midst, and all that remained was for Israel to acknowledge and accept the King whom God had chosen for them (Deut 17:15).

As Jesus began teaching the people what would be required of them in His coming kingdom (Matt 5-7; Luke 6), He spoke of obligations that went well beyond the requirements of the Law of Moses. The people had never been able to measure up to the Mosaic Law, but Jesus was telling them that even those requirements were not sufficient. For example, Jesus taught “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matt 5:21-22). This must have seemed like an impossible standard to live up to. A special work of God in the life of believers would be required in order for sinful human beings to meet the obligations of life in the kingdom that Jesus was proclaiming.

The sad fact is that the leaders of the scattered nation of Israel who were living during Jesus’ ministry were not willing to accept this “King of God’s own choosing.” The Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus and sought to kill Him (Matt 12). From that time forward, Jesus began to withdraw from public life in order to focus on teaching His small group of faithful disciples. Several times Jesus explained to them that His rejection by Israel would mean that He would be put to death (Matt 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:2). In the eternal plan of God, Israel’s rejection of their King would become the means by which the Redeemer would accomplish the perfect atonement for the sins of humanity.

Toward the end of His ministry, Jesus began to share privately with His disciples some of the things that would occur after His death and during the time before His second coming. Jesus would be resurrected and would also ascend to heaven. While there, He would prepare a place for believers, and He promised to return to bring them to be with Him in heaven (John 14:3).

Jesus also promised not to leave them as orphans, but that He would send His Holy Spirit with the unique ministry of indwelling or actually living within those who place their faith in Christ (John 14:16-20). And no longer would the good news of the Messiah be shared only with the lost sheep of Israel, but believers were to go into all nations to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8; 13:47). The "blessing" aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant would now be available to anyone who would trust in their Creator based on what Christ accomplished on the cross. Just as Jesus had attempted to get Nicodemus the Pharisee to understand (John 3), the new birth of regeneration through the indwelling Holy Spirit would be given to those who put their faith in Christ their Redeemer. Believers would have the Spirit's help in living obediently, which would be sorely needed during the time before their resurrection. It is only after the believer receives his incorruptible resurrection body that the flesh will be vanquished (1 Cor 15:42-44).

As we read the Gospels and the first part of the Book of Acts, we see that during the outworking of God's plan there were several phases or transitions to new ways of dealing with people. In line with Old Testament expectations, the coming King, Jesus, lived a perfectly righteous life as a pious Jew under the confines of the Mosaic covenant. During His public ministry Jesus had also taught what would be required of His faithful followers in order to participate in the future kingdom. But He also spoke about the time between His first and second coming, which is often called the age of grace. One theologian has said:

> There is a dangerous and entirely baseless sentiment abroad which assumes that every teaching of Christ must be binding during this age simply because Christ said it. The fact is forgotten that Christ, while living under, keeping, and applying the law of Moses, also taught the principles of His yet future kingdom, and, at the end of His ministry and in relation to His cross, He also anticipated the teachings of grace. If this threefold division of the teachings of Christ is not recognized, there can be nothing but confusion of mind and consequent contradiction of truth.[2]

That quote makes an important point which emphasizes that God's eternal plan for restoring His creation is being implemented in stages using different methods at different times in human history. The time in which we are now living, which is also called the "church age," is the period during which God grants salvation to anyone who trusts only in the finished sacrificial work of Christ. During this present age Jesus sends His Holy Spirit to live within believers, and the gospel is now being shared with the people of all nations.

The atonement Christ completed on the cross ushered in a new era during which God primarily deals with humanity on the basis of His grace to those who place their trust in what Jesus accomplished for them. God's grace means that His blessings are given as an unmerited gift, apart from any human effort, especially in regard to works done to fulfill the Law of Moses that had been given to the nation of Israel. In fact, the apostle Paul tells us that the Mosaic covenant was a temporary provision which was annulled at the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ (Gal 2:16; 3:19; Rom 6:14; 7:6; 8:3-4). As he said in Romans 10:4, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

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[2] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace* (Kregel, 1995), 139.

The wonderful New Testament epistles of Paul, Peter, James, Jude, and John provide essential instructions and encouragement for living during the age of grace today. Also, their message concerning the coming future kingdom is consistent with what we would expect from our reading of the Old Testament and the Gospels. Jesus is coming again as the King who will rule in righteousness for 1,000 years (Rev 20), during which time all of the promises made to Abraham will be completely fulfilled. Ultimately there will be a final judgment during which the unrighteous will be forever separated from the faithful, who will then be ushered into the eternal state of blessedness in the presence of God (Rev 21).

As we read the Bible we are tracing the outworking of God's plan for His creation throughout the ages. God revealed His Word to mankind a little at a time over an extended period of human history. He progressively implements His eternal plan in different stages during different periods. In order to accurately interpret Scripture we must understand that the intended meaning of any Bible passage is determined by its context. This means not only a passage's grammatical context but also its historical context in God's revealed plan for the ages. God means what He says, so He will bless our efforts to understand how He is fulfilling His plan for the ages over the course of human history. To the best of our ability, may we be faithful to You, Lord.