

“GOD’S PLAN FOR THE AGES” (Ephesians 1:7-10)

This morning I want to talk to you about God’s plan for the ages. How many of you like history? How many of you considered history your least favorite subject in school? I have always loved history because the past explains how we got to where we are today. Every day history is being written, and one world-shaking event after another seems to be happening right before our eyes. I’ve often thought about all the changes that took place over the course of my grandparent’s lives – they were born into a world without cars or airplanes or refrigerators or TV – and lived to all these things as well as see a man walk on the moon.

Then I think of all changes I’ve seen in my lifetime – I grew up in a world with no computers, no internet, no cable TV – just three channels with no way to record them – the divorce rate was only 2% - and there were no such things as school shootings or gay weddings. History is taking place at lightning speed and it makes you wonder: Where is all of this headed?

Is human history moving towards an ultimate goal or is history just a series of random events with no purpose or meaning? How you answer this depends on your worldview. *Evolutionary philosophy* says that there’s no meaning or purpose outside the natural world – there is progress, they say – but it’s not towards any particular goal or outcome. *New age philosophy* and eastern religions say that history is cyclical – it goes around and around – we live, we die, then we’re reincarnated into a new life and do it all over again without any real destination or conclusion. *Postmodern and secular philosophy* holds out hope that the world can progress through man-made changes, but leaves any idea of God out of the equation.

Christianity is unique in worldviews in that it reveals a grand, sweeping story with a clear beginning and a clear ending. It reveals that all of history – guided by God – is moving towards a goal – and each step of God’s plan is progressing towards an ultimate conclusion. God reveals His plan in the Bible, and the entire story of the Bible can be summarized in four words: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

- **Creation** speaks of God making the world and everything in it, and declaring it good.
- **The fall** speaks of when sin entered the world and corrupted creation so that everything God made good is tainted by sin and brokenness.
- **Redemption** speaks of God sending His Son into the world to redeem and restore what was broken – through Jesus’ death He forgives us of our sins and calls us into a new life.
- **Restoration** speaks of the day when Christ comes back to earth to create a new heavens and new earth, to undo all the brokenness of sin, to bring full and final restoration, and to consummate everything as He intended it to be.

If you remember these four things you know the overarching story of the Bible and the meaning and purpose of history. At the center of the Bible’s story – at the center of God’s plan is Jesus. Without Jesus there is no redemption for fallen man and we are lost forever in our sin. Without Jesus there is no ultimate conclusion to history and there is no meaning or purpose in life. Jesus is why we come together every Sunday to praise and worship Him because our very life and future depends on Him.

This brings us this morning to our study of the book of Ephesians, and in our passage today we see God's plan for history – His plan for the ages – revealed to those He has saved by His grace. In verse 3 of chapter one the Apostle Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, begins describing all of the spiritual blessings we have as a result of trusting in Christ – and he doesn't stop to take a breath until verse 14 – he is so caught up in the wonder of what God has done for us that words come tumbling out of Him with one incredible thought after another.

These verses are so jam-packed with theological truth that we're going to take our time going through them so that we don't rush through each important truth. Verses 4-14 can be divided into three sections – verses 4-6, which we looked at last week, describe our spiritual blessings from God the Father – He chooses us before the creation of the world to be saved and adopts us into His eternal family. Next week we'll look at our blessings from the Holy Spirit in verses 11-14. This morning in verses 7-10 we're going to look at our blessings from Jesus – God the Son – and how the Father reveals His plan through His Son.

As we dig into verses 7-10 this morning, we see that Jesus is central to all of God's plan and reveals two monumental parts of God's plan... First, He reveals God's plan of redemption at His first coming, and God's plan of restoration which will take place at His Second Coming. Let's look first at **the plan of redemption**. Verses 7-8a says... "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us."

Redemption is not a word we use in everyday talk, but it was a well-known word in Paul's day to describe the liberation of a slave through a ransom. Slavery was extremely common in the Roman Empire of the first century, and many became slaves due to economic hardship. If you fell on hard times and owed someone a lot of money, your best – and sometimes only – option would be to sell yourself into slavery, and the only way you'd get out of slavery is if someone bought you back and set you free – in other words, they would redeem you.

In the same way the Bible says that when Adam and Eve sinned, everyone born after them was born a slave to sin. In chapter 2 Paul describes our slavery as being held captive to the ways of this world, to Satan and his forces of darkness, and to the cravings of our flesh – and deserving of God's wrath and judgment. But... what a great word that is... but redeemed us – He saw our plight, and in His grace and mercy bought us out of our miserable condition of sin and set us free. Through Christ's redemption we are set free from sin's power and control over us – we are set free from additions, from lust and greed, from anger and envy – we are set free to become the people God created us to be – and we set free from the eternal judgment of hell.

God did not just wave a magic wand over us and say, "You're redeemed." Our redemption came at a cost – Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood." We're reminded of the costly price of our salvation when we watch a movie like *The Passion of the Christ* and see all the pain and suffering Jesus endured for us, and His blood that was poured out on our behalf, and we ask, "Isn't there another way for God to redeem us – a way that was not so brutal and bloody – as way in which Jesus did not have to die?"

The shedding of blood shows how seriously God views sin – so seriously that sin results in a death penalty. This is seen from the very beginning of the Bible. Right after Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, God covered their sin and shame with garments of skin. In order for them to be clothed, an animal had to be killed, sacrificing its blood to atone for sin.

Leviticus says that blood represents life and they essentially mean the same thing. The blood carries life-sustaining nutrients to all parts of the body. If blood is flowing through your body, you live. If you lose enough blood, you die.

In the Old Testament, God required the people of Israel to bring an animal sacrifice to the temple to be slain on the altar as an atonement or covering for the sins of the people. This sacrificial system went on year after year after year – hundreds of years – until Jesus came to earth and John the Baptist said, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” All of the Old Testament sacrifices – and all the blood that was shed on the altar – all looked forward to the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus who died as our substitute – and through His death He paid the ransom for our sin and set us free.

Paul goes on to say that the result of our redemption is the *“the forgiveness of sins.”* The Bible says that in order to go to heaven our sins must be pardoned. People often think that in order to go to heaven you must be *good*, but God’s Word says that in order to go to heaven you must be *perfect*. If even the smallest speck of sin were in heaven, heaven would no longer be heaven – and no one wants sin in heaven – we want to be done with it once and for all.

So what’s God to do? He can’t ignore our sin – He can’t excuse it and say, “Boys will be boys” – He can’t sweep it under the rug. The only option is forgiveness, where God says, “I pardon your sin and do not hold it against you.” It’s like when we forgive someone – we say, “I release you from my hard feelings and I hold your offense against you.” But how can God do that? How can He just let our sins go? The only way is through the cross – the only way is for Jesus to take my sin – and your sin – upon Himself and set us free from the guilt and penalty of sin.

One of the greatest promises in the Bible is 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The moment we are saved, all of our sins are wiped away and we are completely forgiven. When God forgives us, what happens to our sins? Does He file them away somewhere in case we mess up and He needs to hold them over us? Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” He remembers them no more. What a great thought! Through the blood of Jesus God pardons my sin and takes away my guilt, so that I can stand perfect before Him through the blood of Jesus.

There’s a great scene from the movie *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. One of the kids, Edmund, falls prey to temptation when the witch offers him some tasty “Turkish Delights.” Edmund becomes obsessed with getting more and he doesn’t care if he has to betray his family to do so. The witch tricks him in to coming to her castle and makes him her captive. Even though he has been disobedient, King Aslan – the lion – sends his forces to rescue Edmund from the clutches of the evil witch. How will Aslan and his brothers and sisters treat this traitor?

In the very next scene, Edmund has a private conversation with Aslan on a hill before he reunites with his siblings. The Aslan and Edmund walk down to the camp to face Peter and Lucy and Susan. Edmund looks sorrowful and ashamed. Before anyone says anything, Aslan says, “What’s done is done. There is no need to speak to Edmund about his past.”

It’s a powerful moment in the movie. Edmund committed very serious crimes that should have resulted in his death, but instead of punishment, he receives forgiveness from the king. That’s how God treats anyone who has been forgiven – they are set free, never to have their sins held against them.

Why would God such incredible things on our behalf? Did He look down from heaven and say, “Don looks like a pretty great guy and worthy of being redeemed and forgiven?” When He looked and me and He looked at you, He saw a sinner through and through. He did it, verse 7 says, *“In accordance with the riches of His grace.”*

Grace is a word we see over and over in Ephesians and is a word that speaks of God’s favor toward the unworthy and the undeserving. In His grace, God is willing to forgive us and bless us abundantly, in spite of the fact that we don’t deserve to be treated so well or dealt with so generously. God is “rich” in grace – He overflows with generosity and delights in lavishing His grace on those He has redeemed and forgiven.

As we move on, we not only we see God’s plan of redemption revealed in Jesus at His first coming, but in verses 8b-10 we see **God’s plan of restoration** revealed through Jesus at His Second Coming... “With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

These verses tell us that history is moving towards an ultimate goal – the day when Christ restores all that was lost in the fall and brings order to the disorder and chaos of our present world, and rules over a glorious kingdom. Paul calls God’s plan to bring history to an ultimate conclusion a “mystery.” A mystery in the New Testament meant something that once was hidden and is now revealed.

God’s plan for history began before the creation of the world, but that plan was kept largely hidden until the coming of Jesus. In the Old Testament God revealed bits and pieces of His plan to various prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel and Daniel, but they were in the dark as to how it all fit together. Once Jesus came to earth, God’s plan came into focus, and unlike the prophets we can look back and see how the whole story of the Bible fits together. Some people say, “I wish I lived in Bible times to see all that they saw,” but they would say, “I would love to have the completed Word of God and see all that you see today.” They would be amazed to hold the Bible in their hands and see all that God reveals.

Paul uses the word “mystery” 21 times in his writings, and each reference centers around the work of Christ – His coming to earth, saving the lost through His death on the cross, bringing Jew and Gentile together to form the church, and one day coming back to earth to receive His church – His bride – unto Himself. All of this was hidden from Old Testament saints and is now revealed in Christ.

In verse 10 Paul says that Christ will “bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth.” That sounds like something politicians say every four years: “Vote for me and I will solve all our problems and bring everyone together.” Yet each year we become more and more divided. The division we see right now is nothing new – ever since Adam and Eve took that fateful bite of forbidden fruit, nothing in the world has been right since. Historians say there have been over 15,000 wars in history and the world has only known 292 years of peace.

In Romans 8 Paul says that creation groans as it awaits its liberation. What an interesting way to put it – creation groans – and it groans because this present world is under a curse. When God created the heavens and the earth, he called creation “good,” but when sin entered the world, creation was placed under a curse and things have never been the same.

We feel the effects of the curse every day when another tragic shooting takes place, when cities are overrun with crime and violence, when pandemics turn our lives upside-down, and when God's design for family and sexual morality is aggressively assaulted. We feel the curse in nature, whenever there is a forest fire that burns out of control or a hurricane or earthquake. On a personal level we feel the curse each time a couple divorces, each time a child rebels, and each time we attend a funeral service. On a spiritual level, we see evil and wickedness grow worse by the day, and wonder where all this is headed.

But praise be to God – because of Jesus we don't have to wonder how everything turns out in the end. Whereas the first few chapters of the Bible begin with a curse, the last two chapter of the Bible ends with the curse being lifted and all things being restored. Listen to what Revelation 21:3-4 says... “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

Did you catch that? The old order of things has passed away. When Christ returns to earth everything will be put back in order. Everything will be brought back into unity and harmony. The prophet Isaiah says, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together... The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest” (Isaiah 11:6a, 8). This kind of world seems unimaginable, but will come about once Jesus returns and vanquishes all evil. With the curse of sin lifted, Christ will bring everything together in perfect unity, and rule over the world in perfect peace and righteousness.

We know all this is going to happen, but when? When will Christ come and wrap up history? There are still mysteries which have not been revealed to us, and when Jesus will come again is one of them. Jesus said, “No man knows the day or the hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

Paul says that God's plan of restoration will be “put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment.” This means that God has a timetable and Christ will come at just the right time. Galatians 4:4 says that in the fullness of time God sent His Son to redeem the world at His first coming – so we know that when the time is right, Christ will come again. God's timetable might not be my timetable, but God sees the beginning from the end, and when we get to heaven, we will see how everything fit together in His perfect plan.

What does this all mean for us? What difference does knowing God has a plan and purpose make in our everyday life? First, it gives every day significance. If this life is all there is, then there's no real meaning or purpose – we just twitter away life and try to stave off boredom. Or we adopt the attitude that we only live once and try to cram as much as we can into this life and mark as much as we can off on our bucket list.

But knowing that God chose us, redeemed us, forgave us, and is coming back for us gives us a divine purpose in life – to glorify God and live all-out for Him. We're only on this earth for a brief moment, and each day is an opportunity to make our life count for eternity. God wants us to occupy our time and attention to spreading the good news of salvation to those who don't know Him, and to use our gifts and talents to serve Him. As Rick Warren reminds us – life is not about us, it's about God.

Second, knowing God has a plan and purpose gives us **peace**. I don't have to sweat out each news headline and worry about where the world is headed. I know where it's headed, and no matter what happens on this earth – no matter how much evil and chaos there is – Christ will bring all things together in the end and reign triumphantly on earth.

Third, knowing God has a plan and purpose gives us **confidence**. Sometimes it's easy to feel like you're on the losing team – like you're outnumbered. During a little league baseball game, a man arrived late and asked a kid in the dugout what the score was. The little boy said, "It's eighteen to nothing – we're behind." The man sympathized with the boy and told him not to be discouraged. The boy said, "Why should I be discouraged? We haven't even gotten up to bat yet!"

As believers, our best life is to come – because we are redeemed and forgiven in Christ, a glorious future awaits us – and while we wait, we rejoice, we weather the storms of life, and stay occupied with what God has given us to do – and we do it all to the praise of His glory.