

Praise God For His Amazing Plan

So What's This World Coming To?

Have you found yourself asking the question lately: “***What is this world coming to?***” Recently, we have witnessed *natural* catastrophes like the recent Tsunami [Slides 1-4]. These pictures were just released to the press this week. They were taken by a vacationing Canadian couple just seconds *apart*—and right *before* they were tragically swept to their deaths by the massive tidal wave [Slide 5]. Even more frightening have been the images of *manmade* catastrophes like 9-11 [Slide 6]. And we are constantly reminded by speeches and multi-colored threat levels that more is likely to come. This past Wednesday night after church, I caught a few minutes of a **PBS** special where the host, former ABC News correspondent Jeff Greenfield led a panel discussion about the looming likelihood of a terrorist attack. Prior to that discussion, they had played excerpts of a recently released **HBO** movie, entitled: Dirty Bomb [Slide 7]. It is about terrorists who detonate a radioactive bomb in spite of all the efforts of the police and intelligence forces to stop them. The balance of the movie is about how emergency-service units respond to the attack—and how they are overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of victims who need treatment [Slide 8] along with the mayhem caused by a population that is poorly prepared to understand or obey anti-contamination and quarantine orders. Seem far-fetched? Not according to the members of that **PBS** panel which included former Senator Warren Rudman, the Commissioner of the N.Y.P.D. and several federal government officials from Health and Human Services and the Dept. of Homeland Security. And the film didn't even begin to address other potential scenarios such as biological, chemical, or conventional weapons.

Speaking of conventional weapons, this past week, our State Department expressed grave concern over the thousands of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that may be in the hands of non-governmental entities—including terrorist groups. They tell us that what is driving this concern is the potential threat to commercial aviation. A single successful missile attack on a passenger plane could paralyze the airline industry which in turn would affect the economy of the United States as well as the economies of other industrialized nations. News like this is enough to make you yearn for the good old days when the enemy was in a well-defined geographical area called the Iron Curtain. The threat may have been frightening—but at least you knew from where it might come!

So what is this world coming to? And what is your life coming to? Before you can answer that question—you have to answer another one. ***How did we get to where we are?*** How did we get to the point where people routinely blow themselves up? Where fanatical organizations have dedicated themselves to the destruction of people and nations? You might be tempted to answer that question politically, culturally, historically—and even religiously. But if you do, you will not understand the *real* problem—and you will miss the hope of the ultimate solution. To understand how we got to where we are today—you don't need to go back to the founding of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians which in turn has spilled over into the rest of the Middle East and beyond.

You don't even need to go back to the defeat of the Moslems at the Battle of Tours, France in the year 732. Up to that point, the Moslem culture seemed destined to defeat and swallow up the newly developing Western culture. But after its defeat at the Battle of Tours, Moslem culture slid back into relative oblivion—at least until *until 9-11*. Many believe that when Al-Qaida wreaked such havoc on the United States back on September 11, 2001, the people who were dancing in the streets were not just celebrating revenge against the Great Satan and friend of Israel. They were celebrating the apparent turn around of what had been a millennial losing streak for Islamic Culture. This conflict is just one strand of a multi-stranded conflict involving tribal groups, ethnic groups, nations, religions and ideologies that have been warring throughout *all* of human history. Conflict is nothing new. It is as old man himself.

But merely going back to ancient history does not explain the ultimate cause of all this. To really understand how we got to where we are—you have to go back even further—all the way to the Garden of Eden. When you read the opening chapters of Genesis, you learn that mankind was originally created in God's image. Adam and Eve, the first human beings were placed here to be God's royal representatives. Just like ancient rulers would place statues of themselves throughout their realms to display their authority—so God placed man on earth to reflect His rule and reign over the earth. That was our original mission in this world—to *visibly* reflect the *invisible* God before the rest of Creation. Everything in creation of course was created to display the attributes of God. But Adam and Eve and their offspring were God's unique workmanship. Oak trees glorify God by pointing to their creator. But man could glorify God by *behaving like* his Creator! Until disaster struck. When mankind in Adam chose to follow a rival authority and rebelled against the Word of God, man ripped the face of God off of himself and became a reflector *of himself!* When he chose to follow the counsel of the Serpent, he exchanged the truth of God for a lie. He rejected the counsel of the true God so he could become his *own* god and worship his *own* desires. What a prospect! Not one true and living God. But as many gods as there are people. And that is all that is needed to set the stage for entrenched conflict. And so the battle rages. People made in the image of God attacking other images of God whom they see as rivals to their personal kingdoms. And this conflict occurs at *every* level of human experience. Not just nations against nations. But persons against persons. Not just on battlefields but in courtrooms and board rooms—and bedrooms. This planet has become a relational nightmare. And all the Kings horses and men—including the United Nations and Dr. Phil have been unable to put it all back together again.

So what does this have to do with Ephesians? Everything! For it is in this sort of context that Paul writes Ephesians 1:9-10. To appreciate these verses, we need to see them in their context—so let's back up to the beginning of this hymn of praise in verse 3.

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will- 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. [PRAY]

Transition: So far in this opening chapter of Ephesians, we have been looking into the Treasure Chest of God's Grace. Last week we looked at verse 7 and marveled at the jewel of God's redemption which gives us freedom from the penalty and power of sin. Verse 8 eight goes on to say that the same grace that redeems us also begins to let us in on the mind of God. God's grace begins to work on our fallen thinking by giving us wisdom and insight into the big picture of His saving purposes. So in verses 9-10, Paul is giving us *yet another reason* to praise God. Not only for choosing us apart from any personal merit (4), not only for adopting us into His family (5-6), not only redeeming us and forgiving our sins (7)—but **for revealing to us His amazing plan!** [Slide 9].

To the casual observer, this world may look as though it is unraveling. Doomsday scenarios are frequent grist for Hollywood plots. But this text says there is a Sovereign God who is in charge—and He this amazing plan! What do *you* really know about this plan? What do you absolutely *need to know* about this plan? It's *all here* in this text. First of all...[Slide 10]

I. God's plan is *supernaturally* disclosed (9a)

Notice the first part of verse 9: "*And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure.*"

Paul uses a word here that immediately grabs our attention: "**mystery.**" What comes to your mind when you here that word? A thriller? A murder plot with a "who done it" theme? Ripley's 'Believe It Or Not?' We all like to be dazzled by mystery and intrigue. But this mystery has a plot much bigger than a murder episode in a movie or on prime time television. This mystery specifically involves "**his will.**"

Many have misunderstood this phrase and have sought unbiblical ways and means to unravel the mystery of God's will. So we need to clarify the definitions here right from the get-go. The phrase, "God's will" has two primary meanings. Both of these are described in Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.

What are the two aspects of God's will in this verse? His **secret** will and his **revealed** will. His secret will is about what **He is going to do**. His revealed will is about what He commands or wills **for us to do**. His secret will belongs to Him. The things He has revealed belong to us. Which begs the question: **Why does God keep secrets?** The answer is simply—because we can't handle his secrets. We have a hard enough time dealing with what He has revealed without trying to

figure out what He hasn't yet revealed! God has revealed things about His purpose in marriage. How that marriage is actually bigger than people finding their soul-mates and having all their dreams come true. It is about two sinners falling in love with Jesus Christ and worshipping Him in a way that begins to affect their relationship with each other. So much so that their relationship becomes a billboard for the Gospel to a watching world. He has revealed that to us and how we can by His grace move in that direction in our relationships. ***But do you know what?*** If we are single, we tend to be less concerned with what God has revealed about marriage and more consumed with prying open the vault of God's secret will and finding out who that mystery man or woman will be! Or if we are already married, we are more concerned about whether or not the plot will ever come around and finally match *our* script—with *our* hopes and *our* dreams.

God keeps secrets because if He didn't, we couldn't handle them! And we would be so distracted by them that we would completely be fascinated away from what He has *already* revealed to us and *wills* for us to *be* and *do*. Tragically people still try to break in and enter the vault of God's secret will. And the result is that they totally miss God's revealed will. That is why God was so down on people going to mediums in the OT. That is why trying to figure out your future through horoscopes, palm readers, and extra-biblical signs is *so wrong*.

Nevertheless, in the history of God's plan to save sinners like us, He has revealed truth which had been unknown to previous generations. That is what the biblical definition of mystery is. The timely disclosure of a previously unknown truth. The OT people of God did not understand this plan. At best they saw hazy indications of it. But they could not put it all together. And the NT people of God—the Church—would not have known about it if God had not revealed it through the Gospel.

You and I cannot understand this truth in a way that causes us to act on its implications—in a way that radically changes our lives—unless God opens our eyes to it. Because God has revealed it to the Church, we don't have to try and pry it from His hands. But unless He opens our eyes, unless He exposes the desires in our hearts that cause us to filter out the essential contents of this plan, we will always miss it. In fact, we will try to re-script it. We will turn the plot into a drama with ourselves as the hero and hire Jesus as our personal agent. That is what Paul is going to be talking about—or I should say be praying about in verses 17-19 which we will look at in two weeks. And so you and I *have to* approach this plan with humble dependence on the Lord to supernaturally reveal it to us through the truth He has revealed in Scripture and by the convicting and clarifying ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Transition: So what is the plan all about? We will get there. But before we go there is something else you must first understand. You need to understand that...

II. God's plan centers on *Jesus Christ* (9b)

Notice the last part of verse 9b: "***which he purposed in Christ.***"

Whatever else we can say about this plan, it centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Bob reminded us this morning about the centrality of Christ and the cross. That is so important and so essential if you are going to truly grasp this plan. We have certainly had a lot of exposure to God's future plan for the world. But all too frequently—something vital has been missing. I can remember as a teenager watching a film that depicted the world's situation immediately following the rapture. And it was very frightening. The point of the film was you had better pray the "sinner's prayer" now—because if you wait too long, it *may be too late*. I can remember attending conferences that gave you a blow-by-blow account of the events of the tribulation period—complete with charts and other visuals. I almost felt like I knew who the anti-Christ was, the color of his eyes and hair, and exactly how many kids he had. In fact, I came away from those conferences knowing more about *anti-Christ* than *Jesus Christ*. Do you see anything wrong with that picture? I have not read the most recent series of books about the end-times, but I hope they have not repeated that error—though I frankly wonder based on what I hear.

Brothers and sisters—we need to get one thing straight. Jesus Christ is *central* to God's plan. And any portrayal of God's plan that leaves Him out or pushes him into the background is straining the meaning of words to call itself truly "**Christian!**"

Just let Scripture speak for itself:

Philippians 2:9-11:

*9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord,**
to the glory of God the Father.*

Think with me for a moment. What is the book of Revelation properly called? Is it the book concerning the details of last time events? No—it is the Revelation or Final and Complete Revealing of **Jesus Christ** in all His glory! **He** is the center of God's plan!

If you would understand God's plan and how it relates to your life here and now as well as in the future, you must understand who the main character is and where He fits into the plot. He is not some stunt man who occasionally does some action scenes—He is the *star!* He is the *hero of the story!* And this hero is right in the middle of *your part* of the story.

How do I know that? Because if you are a believer, *you are "in Christ."* He is producing and directing His plot in your life. But you won't see Him and you won't understand what He is doing unless the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to the real plot. You will confusingly think that you are the hero and you will wonder

why God keeps messing up your plot with all the problems you are facing. You'll completely miss the fact that God is using the difficulties of life to push you toward the *real Hero* whom you need to know and worship. And you won't see what He is doing to re-make your broken image into the image of the real Hero.

Transition: But that is not all you need to know. You need to know not only that God's plan is centered on Jesus Christ, but that...

III. God's plan is right on schedule (10a)

When you look at what is going on in the world, it often seems chaotic. And unless you are interpreting life through the lenses of God's revealed truth, your view of God may be one of a damage control administrator. As though God was wringing his hands in anguish and constantly seeking to put out fires.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Just look at verse 10a:

"to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment..."

This verse is saying that God's plan is unfolding right on schedule. God is not up in heaven looking at your life or the rest of the world for that matter and saying: *"Look Holy Spirit—we have a major problem going on with Bill Smith over in Warren, MI. He just got laid off and things are really tight economically. What are we going to do next?"*

God doesn't even sit up and lurch forward when the Dept. of Homeland Security raises the color alert from Yellow to Orange! Throughout Scripture, God is relaxed. He takes His time. Just think about it. How long between Adam's sin and Jesus' coming to earth? At least 3,000 to 4,000 years! He was obviously in no hurry. And how long did Jesus take to go to the cross. Some 33 years. Why? So he could spend all that time leaning and understanding what it meant to be human so he could not only die on the cross for our sins—but continue to be our faithful, sympathetic High Priest!

God does everything on purpose and therefore everything on time. He came the first time just when the time was right—and He will come again and bring His plan to His intended conclusion—at just the right time. Meanwhile—everything He is doing is deliberate and preparatory for the final act of God's drama of redemption.

Transition: Which leads us to ask the question: What exactly *is* God's plan? We have noted that it must be supernaturally understood. That its plot revolves around the Person and Work of Christ. That it is running on schedule. But what exactly does this plan involve?

IV. God's plan involves the reuniting of *all* that sin has broken (10b)

Look at verse 10b: ***"...to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."***

Here is the main kernel of the plot. From the very beginning, God intended to send His Son to do what no one else could do. To reconcile all Creation to Himself. To put back together that which sin had shattered when sin entered the universe. Let's go back to the Garden and pick up the drama here we left off a few minutes ago.

Almost immediately after Adam and Eve sin, God intervenes with a promise. He starts to repair the damage when he calls a man named Abraham. From Abraham, God calls a new people whose purpose once again is to display God before the world. The whole nation of Israel was to be a priest that represented God before the rest of the world. But as you know—they ultimately failed in that task. Yet God's promises did not falter.

For God's redemptive promises were finally fulfilled in Christ. In effect He said, I will come back. I will make you God's people once again. I will redeem you and reconcile you to the Father.

And then He came. And while on the earth, He did what the first Adam and all mankind had failed to do. When tempted in the wilderness, he chose to work *within* God's promises. He rejected the lies of Satan and obeyed the Father perfectly.

On one occasion, He stood in front of the Temple in Jerusalem and said in so many words—the things that this Temple is supposed to do—“**I AM.**” I Am the restored Presence of God before you. I am the sacrifice which is the only way to God. So He died for our sins—and rose again.

When He died, arose, and went back to heaven—He did something astounding. Through the Holy Spirit, He created a new people—the *Church*. We have become the replacement for the Temple. We have become the dwelling place of God on earth. We are the image that God has left behind to mirror His glory. And we are the agents of change who are to model and proclaim God's message of reconciliation to a watching world. We are *even* a reminder to the angels that God will take care of any unfinished business in the angelic realm as well. That is what he means when he talks about “*bringing all things in heaven together under one head.*”

One day the curtain of God's redemption will finally drop—only to immediately open again with a scene in heaven that is described by John in Revelation 5:11-14:

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

*“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”*

14 The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Transition: Here is the question I want to leave with you: Where do you and I fit into this plot? If you would be a fitting character in this drama....

V. God’s plan requires you to submit your script to the main plot (**Rest of Ephesians**).

I don’t have time to go through the book. But I suggest you start reading it through. As you do, you will start to see how the Holy Spirit unfolds this plot. You will see what Christ has done in chapter two in order to not only break down the barrier between you and God—but between you and others. Not just barriers of differences, race, and religion—but the barriers erected by our own selfish sinfulness. Christ has broken all that down.

But as you move to the latter part of Ephesians, your part in the script picks up. Your work of being reconciled to other believers becomes a vital part of your being able to reconcile lost people to God. And so Paul writes in Ephesians 4:2:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

That line is your most important line. If you forget that line, you will blow your lines later on with your marriage, your parenting, your work, or your ministry in the body or in the world.

By the way, the significant people around you do not all have to be carrying out their lines flawlessly for you to reflect Christ as the hero through your life. In fact, He showed us how to do live while surrounded by self-centered disciples.

But here is the challenge. You have to be willing to stick with God’s plot. You must not seek your identity outside of God’s story of redemption. And you must not try to rewrite the script to make your goals and dreams the center of the story. And in so doing—you upstage the bigger story of Christ and the Church. When you do that, you totally mess up the story and become a Glory Thief—someone who robs the glory from the One True Hero.

You don’t need to do that. You can see that when you go home tonight and take a peek at the Academy Awards. There you have Glory Theft at its finest—or worst. Don’t add to it. Show the world a different plot with a different hero. Show them Jesus this week.

So what is this world coming to? Your answer really depends on who ***your*** hero ***really*** is.

