

Sunday@Seven

SERIES 2: Encounter with God in the Old Testament

STUDY 1

CREATION: ENCOUNTERING GOD'S PURPOSE

The first study in this series looked at the purpose of God as revealed in creation focusing on the first 3 chapters of Genesis.

In it, we saw that the Bible begins with an introduction to God.

An Introduction to God

God is a new name given to that unknown Power which brought the world into existence. It is a new name given to Someone or Something not otherwise accounted for. It is a name for the Supreme Person, the Supreme Power, the One who is above and over all others and other things.

The Bible's introduction to God in Genesis mirrors our encounter with God in personal experience. We meet God as Someone not accounted for in any of the other aspects of our life. Unseen, His presence creates an awareness of someone who – we believe – can bring a resolution to our disordered lives. His word is the promise on which that faith is based. We believe he can do what nothing and no one else can do.

This God is presented as being active through His word, bringing things into being and bringing order out of chaos. That reflects our introduction to God in our experience. Through hearing His word we discover that He is someone bigger, greater, more powerful, more majestic than anyone else, and – again by His word - someone who can create order out of the chaos of our sinful lives

That creative activity is marked by two things.

1. God speaks. God's word is powerful and creative. As He speaks, He brings things into being and in doing so, reveals a pattern and a process for doing that.
2. It is prefaced by God's Spirit moving. Again this corresponds with the human experience of becoming a Christian when there is that the awareness of God moving, the stirring in the heart, a conviction arising from the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Then God speaks, and says: Let there be light. And into our dark souls comes the illumination of the knowledge of God by that light. That light now enables us to see the mess that our lives are in and so are prepared to see the potential of the prospective creative and redemptive work that God will bring about in our hearts.

Against that general picture of creation, what can we learn about God's purpose?

Taking the first three chapters of Genesis as they stand there seem to be three main emphases. In a literal sense of course they present overlaps and parallel versions of events, almost contradictions as the account is given from different perspectives and for different purposes. But overlooking the small details, attributing them to literary style, it is interesting to see three main features emerging.

1. Chapter 1 describes the natural environment. Here God provides a physical environment for mankind that is orderly, systematic and complete. It is nothing less than complete and perfect providing all that is needed.
2. Chapter 2 focuses on humanity. 'Man' is formed out of the dust of the earth. The way God does that is to form a material body from the dust of the earth, and He breathes His life into it so that 'man' becomes a living soul, thus combining material and spiritual. This is the distinctive of human life: that there is within a man's being that spiritual dimension, a capacity for life from above to enter in and out. That is part of the completeness of created man. Further, God's purpose for man is to give him an occupation, a pleasant occupation without the toils and the labours that sadly were to follow later. And language is a means that he uses to describe the things around him and to conceptualise and to communicate his thoughts. He is

also given a 'help-meet' and companionship and, by implication, he rules over this created order. God's purpose for man is clearly a very good, positive, and fulfilling one.

3. In chapter 3, the understanding is that there is a transcendent and one of the unique functions of the created man is to meet with his God and commune at the cool of the day. It is a communion that combines autonomy and authority.

But in chapter 3 that communion, sadly, is fractured. Listening to the unsolicited advice from the servant (who, incidentally lacks any credentials) which suggests that by providing prohibition, man is being denied the very knowledge that could make him god. God's intention for man is to encourage him to trust God for things that he cannot see and things he cannot know; and to enjoy all that God has provided for him. But the poisonous insinuation is that man in fact could have hold of these things for himself and, in taking of the forbidden fruit, does so only to find himself not in liberty but in bondage.

That is what is meant by the Fall and ever since every human being born into the world is born into this position where, assuming to be complete and self-sufficient, he falls victim of that limited ability. Sin means being cut off from God (and all the resources that are in God) and having to cope himself in a world that has been cursed because of the disobedience. That is bondage.

Yet, jumping ahead to the rest of the Old Testament and into the New Testament, it is clear that God has a redemptive purpose for mankind which is to rescue him from that situation of bondage. Various procedures are highlighted in the OT, but the people abused them. Despite the potential, because of neglect, this proved to be a failure, prompting the NT comment: "What the law could not do." It needed more.

In the New Testament Jesus comes into the fallen world, and by His death on the Cross sets free those who trust in Him. It can, therefore, be reasonably concluded that a Christian is someone who has accepted this offer of release by grace and who lives in anticipation of the restoration. Meanwhile, an awareness of what the Bible teaches about that new life informs and influences the Christian's conduct as an individual and collectively as the church.

STUDY 2

NOAH AND SALVATION FOR THE WORLD

The studies which followed are concerned with the experiences of individuals who were used by God to initiate various means of salvation by their obedience to God and following His directives. The first of these is Noah.

By this time the world was in an evil state and wickedness was prevalent everywhere.

Against this background Noah was called by God to do something quite extraordinary. He was told to build an ark which was an innovative 'floating box' at a time when there was no sea or expanse of water to sail it on. Strange though this was, Noah proceeded to build it and, when he had finished it, he put into it his own family, seven of every clean animal, and two –male and female - of all the others.

The Ark was sealed and soon after it came to rain, a deluge that did not stop until the world was flooded.

However, being in the Ark meant protection and safety for Noah, his family and the animals he had included. They were able to be kept afloat on the surface of the water, while the rest of life drowned. That lasted for some time and when eventually the waters receded, Noah and his family was able to come out of the Ark and to begin a new life, offer some of the clean animals in sacrifice and, because of the foresight of pairings, ensure, that life was to continue.

The Ark is a very wonderful picture of salvation.

What God offers us is a shelter from this world's sinful fate. That provision is in Jesus Christ. When we shelter in that provision then we too are offered that experience of 'buoyancy', overcoming sin and triumphing in adversity. It also means that in that experience there is the potential for new life and the continuation of life, as well as the wherewithal to worship and to praise our God.

Noah's contribution was obedience to God in making the Ark, as told, thus making provision for salvation, as well as experiencing that same salvation himself. That is the significance of this experience for us. We are to know the experience of salvation by trusting in the work of Jesus, in His death and resurrection. There He endured the deluge of wrath for sin, died, but was raised from the dead and is the only One who can survive sin and its effects. That is the salvation of 'floating' for those who put their trust in gospel; and its corollary that those who do not enter the Ark, that provision for salvation, are doomed to be lost.

More than that we too can be those who offer that salvation to others by proclaiming that same provision through the gospel.

The epistle to the Hebrews summarises it like this: "*Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, prepared an ark for the saving of his house*".

STUDY 3: ABRAHAM AND THE CALL OF GOD

Abraham is another example of an encounter with God. The circumstances and details are different from Noah but the principle – of experiencing and being the instrument of ‘salvation’ – is similar.

Despite the gracious provision of a new beginning under Noah, the story of the nation is a dismal one. People were still unfaithful and the tower of Babel incident demonstrates something of the confusion that resulted when people turn their back on God.

Against this background, God called Abraham to leave his home, his country and his family, to follow God by faith, and to be the father of a new nation. He was to occupy a land that God would give him.

That is exactly what Abraham did and in obedience he left the familiar and the immediate and set out on an unknown journey.

Along the way, he encountered many setbacks, not least losing the apparent best of the land to his nephew, Lot. However, God rewarded him through a promise that he would possess the land and that he would have descendants. This was a long time coming but he still trusted God and in time Isaac was born. Abraham indeed did become the father of a great nation. (He is still regarded today as the father of the Jews and the Old Testament is the story of that people with their distinctive history and unique way of life.)

Abraham’s encounter with God is again a vivid illustration of salvation experience.

When we encounter the gospel, it is a challenge to leave our natural and familiar environment of sinful living, the situation as described in Ephesians 2 when it is said that we “*walked according to the course of this world, and were children of wrath, even as others*”

Becoming a Christian is responding to the call of God. It means regarding His voice as stronger and more important than all the familiar voices around. And, once that voice is heeded then we become effectively detached or disconnected from the world and at the same time connected to God and the spiritual realm. The New Testament calls it being ‘born again’. In that way there is the potential of a new life, an unknown life but one that is assured if we follow the lead being given to us by God, being sensitive and alive to Him, His leading, and His commands.

Of course, as in Abraham’s case, that may appear to be a retrograde step with the apparent loss of what the world around values. Also, there is no obvious tangible benefit: quite the reverse. It is a case of

*All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to His blood*

Or, as Paul put it, “*I count all things but loss*”.

It is also an apparent struggle and endeavour to press on in an unknown direction to an unseen destination.

Yet all the cadence is that Abraham traversed that journey with strength for he “*looked for a city whose builder and maker was God*”. For him, it was a positive experience bringing with a sense of peace and assurance that he has not known before. Paul also sees the positive for the loss is nothing compared with the “*excellency of the knowledge of Christ*”.

It was based on the strength of a promise made by God. That is the assurance for the Christian who responds to the call of God, leaves this world, not literally just yet, but figuratively, apparently deprives himself of those things

*"I once held dear
Built my life upon
All this world reveres
And wars to own."*

But the promises of God are sure. There is the possession of 'territory', a new existence, and the entering into a living relationship with God that far outweighs any thing that has been lost. This encounter with God is a key to the future.

STUDY 4:

MOSES AND DELIVERANCE FROM BONDAGE

OR

MOSES AND THE EXODUS

So far, we have looked at Creation and at Noah as examples of God's saving purpose. Then we saw Abraham as an example of faithful obedience experiencing that salvation and new life.

The story then goes on to record the subsequent settlement of Jacob's family - the children of Israel - in Egypt. However there was a change of regime (*"there arose a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph"*) and the people who had been invited in as visitors found themselves slaves. In response to their pleas, God raised Moses to be a deliverer.

At the time of Moses the nation had been in Egypt for hundreds of years. Originally they had been invited as guests of Pharaoh through Joseph. But, in the meantime, there was a change of regime. They were now slaves subject to severe bondage. Because of that, they cried out to their God and, in answer to their prayers, God raised up Moses to seek their release so that they could return to the land he had promised to Abraham.

That is a clear picture of our situation and of the context in which the gospel applies. We are prisoners to sin, under the regime of Satan, and in bondage. That was not the original story, for God created man to enjoy the earth. He was to be fruitful and multiply and be fulfilled. But, by listening to the serpent, mankind changed allegiance from God to the devil and ever since, all humanity has been under that oppressive regime. Salvation requires a cry and a longing to get out of that situation of bondage.

Despite manifestations of great power it was the Passover Lamb that eventually opened the way for the children of Israel to leave Egypt. By putting the blood on the Lamb on the door posts they escaped the worst effects of the angel of death and were able to be released from Egypt, pass through the Red Sea and begin their journey to the Promised Land through the wilderness.

In the same way, release for us is through the Blood of Jesus Christ shed on Calvary. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that *"Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us"*. Realising that we are in bondage, our encounter with God leads us to cry out to Him and to trust by faith in the provision He has made through Jesus' death and resurrection. That releases us from sin's hold and Satan's dominion over us. It also opens the way for us to start a new journey, a pilgrimage through the wilderness on the way to our 'promised land' - in heaven.

In the wilderness they found themselves bereft of sustenance. They had left one kind of life but were ill equipped to enjoy the other. However, God's faithfulness provided them with manna, water, guidance, government and the assurance of His presence with them all the time.

In the same way, as new Christians on our unknown journey, we can have the assurance that God will feed us. We often sing

*"Bread of heaven,
Feed me till I want no more."*

That hymn is based on the analogy of the wilderness experience as an example of the path the Christian walks toward God.

There is much to look forward to and the children of Israel, having proved God's faithfulness, were soon to encounter another aspect of His being and of His demands on them in a new experience.

STUDY 5: MOSES AND THE TABERNACLE

When Moses was commissioned to go to Pharaoh to seek the release of the children of Israel from Egypt, he was told that *“this will be a sign to you: when you have brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”* And on that mountain, Sinai, God gave him the Ten Commandments which were an indication that, in this new life and on this new path, there were rules that they were expected to observe.

The privilege of being the children of God, rescued from Egypt, brought with it an obligation and responsibility - positive living that reflected something of the character of God. The Lord Jesus summarised these in the New Testament as: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart; and your neighbour as yourself”*. The characteristic features of Christian life are to worship God and to be good to others, in that order.

There is a lesson from this for us. As Christians, there are standards that we are expected to keep, standards that reflect the character and the righteousness of our God. For us it is not just the Ten Commandments but the whole Book which contains them. The Bible is our guide; and the responsibility of Christian people is to follow the teaching of the Bible in their life through the wilderness.

But there was more. Moses was also given the pattern for the Tabernacle, this unique, flexible, movable, dwelling place for God which was to be manufactured and located at the centre of the encampment and was to go with them wherever they went. It was to be God’s home in their midst and the place where they worshipped Him.

The interesting thing about the Tabernacle, in contrast to the Ten Commandments, is that God did not give the article itself, only the pattern. He gave a very clear indication of what He wanted, but its manufacture was dependent on their supplying the materials and engaging in its manufacture and production.

That has important lessons for us in our understanding of our encounter with God. In the Bible, God has shown what He wants by way of the church, Christian living, and testimony. But that has to be produced by people from materials that they contribute and efforts that they put into it. All of that is to be focused on materialising what is clearly a vision from God. The church has that unique responsibility of representing the home of God in among people. It is done by the obedient acts and endeavours of people who belong to Him.

The Tabernacle moved with them and was always at the centre of their life right through their wilderness experience.

The representation of God, and God at home, is a key responsibility for us as Christians: not only to obey His commands but also to display His presence.

STUDY 6: DAVID AND THE TEMPLE

When eventually they came into the Promised Land under Joshua and settled under the Judges they were still exposed to pressure from outside nations who were opposed to their occupying the land that God had promised to Abraham. They resorted to a King who turned out to be a failure. Eventually David was commissioned [and again David is an example of an encounter with God. His qualifications were not might or power or status but the fact that in his ordinary life as a shepherd boy he had proved the power of God in the everyday things of his life.]

David's endeavour ensured that the land was occupied by the people and free of enemies. It was his great desire to find a permanent home for his God. He was not allowed to see this come to pass but the measure of his commitment was that he poured all his energies into making sure that it eventually did. He negotiated contracts, secured materials, set the commission and entrusted it to his son Salomon to build that edifice. When subsequently done it was described as being 'exceedingly magnificent'.. It was the height of the story of the nation and it was a remarkable encounter with God.

Sadly the existence of that permanent temple led to complacency and eventually caused compromise and apostasy.

However if we stay with David and the longing for a permanent house for God, we see a clear example of the benefits of an encounter with almighty God. His whole life was committed to seeing God have a permanent home and a very clear and magnificent dwelling right at the heart of the nation. No wonder David was a man who sang praise to his Almighty God.

We could quote a number of his psalms but perhaps the hymn that best describes this kind of encounter with God is the one we often sing in dedication:

Take my life and let it be,
Consecrated Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love.
Take my feet and let them be,
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice and let me sing;
Ever only for my king.
Take my lips and they will be
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold;
Not a might would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use,
Every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it Thine;
It shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart it is Thine own;
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love O Lord I pour
At Thy feet its treasure store.

Take myself and I will be,
Ever, only, all for Thee.

There is an interesting feature about the Temple when Solomon was building it which has significant lessons for us.

It was made from materials that were acquired from a whole range of sources. Yet, the intricate stonework was made ready at the quarry. Away from the building site, stones were shaped in all kinds of strange designs. It was not easy to appreciate their shape while there isolated in the quarry but, when they were brought together on site and fitted into their particular place they dovetailed noiselessly and beautifully. It is said that “no sound of hammer or chisel was heard in the temple.”

That is a very wonderful picture of the way God works in individual Christian lives. Isolated, there often seems to be no rhyme or reason why God should shape – or allow to be shaped – in that precise way. Questions like: Why He does this? Why has that particular experience happened to me? or, Why am I this particular shape? cannot be answered in isolation. And yet that is the exact shape that is required to fit in with the others in the structure that is the church. In the New Testament the analogy is the body comprising one of each member which then fit together, belong together, and operate in a coordinated way.

That is why individual responsibility in Christian life is very important. We need to ensure that our personal devotion to God is strong and make sure that our personal holiness and individual commitment is such that we are shaped in such a way that we, too, fit equally noiselessly and beautifully together into the whole structure. God brings people of great diversity and long periods of shaping together to be His dwelling place.

That is a significant lesson we learn from David. It is a long way from the simple action of entering the ark or responding to the call, as Abraham did. Yet, it is all part of that salvation. Not just escape from doom but constructively being committed and involved to see

Thy Kingdom come, and
Thy will be done on earth.

There is one of Wesley’s hymns that expresses something of that commitment: It goes like this:

O Thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart.

There let it for Thy glory burn
With inextinguishable flame
And, trembling, to its source return
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus confirm my heart’s desire
To work and think and speak for Thee
Still let me guard the holy fire
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

Ready for all Thy perfect will
My acts of love and faith repeat;
Till death Thine endless mercies cease
And make the sacrifice complete.

May that be our prayer.

These encounters with God have much to teach us. From them we understand something of God's ways and have the duty to replicate these in our life and testimony, both as individual Christians and as a church.