

God's Overall Plan... Essential Elements¹

The Bible and Revelation

The most important thing in life is knowing the one true God. Jesus said, “*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” (John 17:3). God created people fundamentally for relationship with himself. This relationship depends on knowing who he is as he has revealed himself, what he has done, who we are in his eyes, and what he requires of us.

God is personal, which means he has a mind, will, emotions, relational ability, and self-consciousness. Because he is personal, and not merely an impersonal object, God must personally reveal himself to us. He has done this in general revelation (the world), special revelation (the Word of God), and in the life and passion of Jesus Christ—his Son.

God's plan is to save believers (see below¹) from their sins—and to bring them fully and finally to himself (John 3:16-18; 2 Pet 3:9; 2 Tim 2:10). Believers have been saved from the *penalty* of their sins; they are currently being saved from the *power* of sin; and one day, when God's plan of salvation is completed and they are with Christ, they shall be like him, and they shall be saved even from the very *presence* of sin. This is God's plan of salvation.

God's ultimate purpose in redemptive history is to create a people, from every tribe and nation, to dwell in his presence, glorifying him through their lives and enjoying him forever.

Revelation 21:3-4 **“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live 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.”**”

The grand historical narrative of the Bible begins with God in eternal glory before the beginning of time and history and ending with God and his redeemed people in eternal glory... “*When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*” (Colossians 3:4).

✝ At the center stands the cross, where God revealed his glory through his Son.

So let's establish a framework for God's overall plan in the chronology of dispensations² beginning with Adam and ending with the believer's eternal home—the new heaven and new Earth. Such a study may seem unnecessary. However, the lack of such biblical teaching has bred confusion, fantasy, and out-and-out heresy concerning biblical doctrine. Knowing God's overall plan is essential for a true biblical worldview.

¹ **Believers** are Jews and Gentiles who by the grace of God, through faith, have received Christ by “believing” (Eph 2:8-9; John 1:12-13, 20:31; Acts 15:7-8, 16:31-34; Rom 3:22-24, 10:9-10; 1 Cor 1:21, 15:2-4; Eph 1:13-14; 1 Tim 1:16; Heb 10:39, 11:6; 1 John 3:23-24, 5:13). Believing means to Acknowledge, Commit to, and Trust in Christ as Savior. To “believe in” Jesus includes both a wholehearted trust in him for forgiveness of sins and a decision to forsake one's sin or to “repent.” All who truly “repent [or turn from their sins] and believe [in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins]” will be redeemed (Mark 1:15) and restored to a right relationship with God (1 John 1:9). To “believe in” Jesus also requires relating to, and putting trust in, Jesus as he truly is—not just a man in ancient history but also a personal living Savior today, seated at the right hand of the Father, who is sovereign and who knows every heart, and hears all prayers.

² **Dispensations** are a particular era in which God deals with humans in a certain way. For instance: The era of innocence—Creation to the Fall; the era of conscience—Adam to the Flood; etc.

Time of Innocence

Since Adam, God has dealt with mankind through the progression of history to bring all things to fulfillment according to His Word. God has always given man a choice to accept or reject His direction. This has been the case from the very onset of man's existence in the Garden of Eden. The Garden Period was a time of innocence supplied with choice through free will.

The period of innocence lasted until Adam sinned against God and was removed from the Garden. Adam and Eve had enjoyed access to every tree except one; therefore, choice did exist. Through the devil's deception, Adam chose to disobey God and eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Therefore, all mankind have been born under the curse of sin since Adam. It was then that death became a sentence for man (Rom. 5:12-17). What began with spiritual death—separation from God was followed by physical death (Rom. 6:23).

Romans 5:12-13 **“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned-- for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.”**

Age of Personal Responsibility--Conscience

Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden brought an age of personal responsibility. The sentence would be immediately realized through labor: the sweat of the brow and pain in childbirth (Gen. 3:16, 19). Not only was God's grace and mercy known because of the Garden experience, but also the plight of disobeying God was known due to Adam's sin. Man's conscience would be his guide during this time.

Also during this age of responsibility, Adam's firstborn son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel. Abel was the first human to die physically because of sin. However, God continued a godly lineage through another son of Adam and Eve... Seth. Through this lineage Christ later came to Earth.

As punishment for his sin, Cain was cast away from the family and left to become a fugitive and a vagabond (Gen. 4:12). God put a mark (*owth* [as in appearance], as that of a beacon) on Cain for recognition, for shunning, and for his protection (Gen. 4:15). Cain's expulsion and mark also stood as a reminder of God's punishment against sin. Thus, those attributes both pleasing and displeasing to God were known during this age of responsibility.

Flood of Noah

Due to the flourishing population and the working of evil in the hearts of men, corruption and degradation abounded after Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Man's lack of self-discipline during the age of responsibility caused the searing of the conscience. Man became self-reliant. Disrespect for God's principles continued. Such sin brought the necessary cleansing of the Earth, which came by flood.

Noah, a descendant of Adam through his son Seth, found grace in the eyes of the Lord and was spared this terrible judgment. The Bible clearly reveals that only eight individuals survived the flood of Noah's time (I Peter 3:20). This deluge covered the entire Earth and wiped out all forms of life (Gen. 6:17) except Noah, his family, the chosen animals in the ark, and the sea creatures.

Genesis 6:17 **“I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish.”**

God made a covenant with Noah that the Earth would never again be flooded by water. God gave a rainbow as a sign of that covenant.

The Age of Man's Covenant—Human Government

A great rebellion against the God of Noah was headed by Nimrod, a descendant of Noah through his son Ham. This was the time of the infamous Tower of Babel and the confusion of languages. However, a godly lineage continued through Noah's son, Shem. Through Shem's lineage came a man called Abram ("high father"), whose name God later changed to Abraham ("father of a multitude" - Gen. 17:5).

The age of God's covenant with mankind for eternal purposes began with Abram. He became a great man of faith. His father, Terah, was an idolater (Josh. 24:2), yet Abram purposed to follow the one and only God (Gen. 12:1-3). Abram later came to be recognized as the father of nations (people of God), thus the name Abraham. It was his faith that was recognized by the people of God throughout history. The children of Israel came through Abraham's grandson, Jacob and his sons.

The Age of the Law

Abraham's descendants fell under Egyptian bondage due to the process of sin. During this time Moses was born. He later led the Hebrew children from this bondage. After the escape from bondage came the necessity for the Law. This Law was given to direct the people and was necessary because of sin... [Read Gal. 3:19](#).

Nelson's Bible Dictionary defines the Law as: An orderly system of rules and regulations by which a society is governed. At Mt. Sinai, during the exodus from Egyptian slavery, a unique law code was established by direct revelation from God to direct His people in their worship, in their relationship to Him, and in their social relationships with one another.

The Ten Commandments express God's moral character and thus reveal righteousness to humanity. The commandments expressed the moral responsibilities of those living in old covenant relationship with God. Although the commandments were in themselves holy, just, and good they were unable to produce righteousness in members of the Old Testament community because of man's sin nature and the resulting rebellion against God.

The Age of Ultimate Responsibility--Grace

The age of ultimate responsibility refers to the time extending from the Day of Pentecost until the "*catching away*" of the Church (called the Rapture). This period of time is also known as the Church Age.

Acts 17:30-31 **"In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."**

The Law ended in Christ Jesus. He came not to destroy (demolish) the Law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). The Law is now our schoolmaster that brings the people of God to Christ Jesus. Christ came to Earth to be the ultimate sacrifice for man, the only way by which man could be freed from the curse of sin and death and be righteous (1 Cor. 15:21-22). Salvation was offered because of grace—God's undeserved kindness to sinners.

This era of grace, the Church Age, is also an age of ultimate responsibility. The responsibility lies in believing, by faith, in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and living, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit, a life exemplary of that profession of faith in Christ. Therefore, all people everywhere become responsible for their own fate if they

do not trust God's plan of salvation through Jesus.

- If one is not with Christ, he is against Christ (Matt. 12:30; Lk. 11:23).
- To steadfastly refuse to “receive” Him by “believing” in his name is the unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:31).

No one should ignore the Spirit's urging to “believe.” Jesus said: *"He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad. Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men"* (Matthew 12:30-31).

John 3:18 “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son”.

Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension have assured eternal life for all those who call upon His name. The age of responsibility describes the time when “...whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord [Jesus] shall be saved” (Rom. 3:10,13; 3:23; 5:12; 6:23; 5:8; 10:9,10,13).

We are now living in this age of responsibility awaiting the return of our Lord. This necessitates a future plan and that plan is clearly revealed by God in his Word.

Biblical Chronology of Things to Come

The Rapture

The next major event for believers (the Church) will be the “catching away” commonly called the Rapture (1 Thess.4:17). The Rapture will occur seven years prior to the Second Coming of Christ. The Bible gives us no signs preceding the Rapture; however, many passages of Scripture indicate that it will happen at any moment (Matt. 24:36; Lk. 21:36; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 3:10). All believers who are alive, along with those who have died after the Day of Pentecost and before the Rapture, will be included in this event (1 Thess. 4: 13-17). The resurrection of believers will occur at the Rapture.

The word “rapture” comes from the Latin word *rapera*, which means to be “caught up” and this is the term used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17: *“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together...”*. The New Testament was originally written in Greek... the Greek word is *harpazo*.

Those who miss the Rapture, by reason of rejecting (not believing) Christ as Lord, will be on earth to face seven years of the most terrible events in Earth's and mankind's history. This time is called the Tribulation Period (Matt. 24:21).

The Judgment Seat of Christ

Paul affirms the judgment of every believer in 2 Corinthians 5:10... *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”* It immediately follows, or will occur in conjunction with, the Rapture.

The Marriage Supper of the Lamb

This event will occur in heaven after the Rapture, after the Judgment Seat of Christ, and before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to Earth (Rev. 19:7-9). This time frame is realized because the Church (“caught up” believers) will return to Earth with Christ (Zech. 14:5; Col. 3:4; 1 Thess. 3:13; Jude 14; Rev. 19:7-9). Then the Bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2) will be represented by the term “wife” (Rev. 19:7).

The Second Coming of Christ—2nd Advent

The Second Coming of Christ is when Christ will split the eastern sky and return to Earth to set up His

millennium kingdom. It will be the most glorious event the world has ever seen (Read Rev. 19:11). The Church, aka – the Body of Christ—the wife of Christ will rule and reign with Christ during the earthly kingdom.

The Judgment of Nations—Gentiles

The judgment of Gentiles will occur after the Tribulation Period and after the Second Coming of Christ. It will occur immediately after the Lord comes to the Earth to reign over His earthly kingdom (Matt. 25:31; Lk. 1:32). This judgment will be directed toward the gentile nations of people on Earth who help or do not help the children of Israel during the Tribulation Period because it is directed toward bringing the children of Israel to repentance.

Those judged at this event will either be cast into the Lake of Fire or allowed to enter into the Millennial Reign, depending upon their actions toward "*my brethren*" (Read Matt. 25: 31-46). Those who aid the children of Israel (Jews) are represented as sheep in Matthew's Gospel account and those who do not help the Jews are represented by goats.

The Age of the Millennial Reign of Christ—Kingdom

This is the period when Christ Jesus will rule and reign upon the Earth from Jerusalem for 1,000 years. Those included in the Rapture will rule and reign with Him (Rom. 8:17; II Tim. 2:12).

Today, the term "millennium" has overshadowed the use of the biblical term "kingdom." This is due to the mention of only the length of this period in Scripture, that is, the "*one thousand years*" of Revelation 20:1-5. The term is also used to minimize confusion between the spiritual and literal kingdoms of Christ.

The Millennial Reign and the Kingdom have often been treated interchangeably. They are so called because Christ will set up a divine government on Earth over the nations of the world. It is the "*thy kingdom come*" of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10).

The Creation of the New Heaven and New Earth

After the dissolution of the present heaven and earth at the end of the millennium, God will create a new heaven and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). By a definite act of creation God calls into being a new heaven and a new earth. As God created the present heavens and earth to be the scene of His theocratic display, so God will create the new heavens and earth to be the scene of the eternal theocratic kingdom of God.

Israel's covenants guarantee the people the land, a national existence, a kingdom, a King, and spiritual blessings in perpetuity. Therefore there must be an eternal earth in which these blessings can be fulfilled. By a translation out of the old earth Israel will be brought into the new earth, there to enjoy forever all that God has promised to them. Then it shall be eternally true... as seen in Revelation 21:3 "*Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*"

The creation of the new heavens and new earth is the final preparatory act anticipating the eternal kingdom of God. It will then be true, that God has a kingdom "*wherein dwelleth righteousness.*"

Eternal Destiny of Believers

In relation to the eternal destiny of believers, it is to be observed that their destiny primarily is related to a Person rather than a place. While the place looms with importance (John 14:3), the place is overshadowed by the Person into whose presence the believer is taken, as seen in these Scriptures:

- *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also* [John 14:3].
- *When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory* [Col. 3:4].

- *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord [1 Thess.4:16-17].*
- *Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; we shall see him as he is [1 John 3:2].*

It is the Person who is emphasized in all the passages dealing with the glorious expectation of the Church rather than the place to which they are taken.

We see, from passages such as Revelation 21:3 that the Lord Jesus Christ will be dwelling with men on the new earth in the eternal kingdom. Since Scripture reveals that the church will be with Christ, we can conclude that the eternal abode of the church will likewise be in the new earth, in that heavenly city—New Jerusalem, that has been especially prepared by God for the saints. Such a relationship would be the answer to the Lord's Prayer for those God had given Him.

John 17:24 **"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."**

Since the eternal glory of Christ will be manifested in the eternal kingdom in his eternal rule, it is natural that the Church should be there to behold that glorification of Christ forever.

Salvation is spiritual and physical

God brings spiritual salvation in the form of personal fellowship, spiritual intimacy, and the promise of eternal life with God (Read Ephesians 1:3-8). However, salvation also includes temporal, external deliverance—"salvation" in a physical sense. Therefore, salvation is not merely spiritual.

Believers can and should look forward to the resurrection of the body and to "*new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwell*" (2 Peter 3:13). Personal salvation starts with renewal of the heart, but in the end it will be comprehensive... physical and spiritual, and cosmic in scope. The Old Testament, when it speaks of the Promised Land, physical prosperity, and physical health anticipates the physical nature of the true Christian believer's prosperity in the new heavens and the new earth.

Eternal Perspective

The biblical doctrines and truth discussed herein have only covered the highlights of God's overall plan so that believers can know that they are not traveling through history in a helter-skelter fashion. God's Word reveals order and direction, which includes both spiritual and physical death, and eternity. Not one person is excluded from God's order of things to come. Scripture teaches that every member of the human race is accountable to God (Jeremiah 17:10; 32:19). There is one true God from whom we come, through whom we live, and to whom we are accountable.

God's ultimate purpose in redemptive history is to create a people to dwell in his presence, glorifying him through their lives and enjoying him forever in eternal glory. The grand historical narrative of the Bible begins with God in eternal glory before the beginning of time and history, and it ends with God and his redeemed people in eternal glory. The history of salvation is the grand overarching story of the Bible and embracing it gives coherence to all of life.

✚ It calls each of God's people to own the story personally and it dignifies each believer with a role in the further outworking of the story in this life and for eternity.

Philippians 3:20-21 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

ⁱ Based on "When Death Comes," chapter 4, by Keith Harris, The Olive Press; and ESV Study Bible, "God's Plan of Salvation" article; Crossway Bibles