

## Unit 1 Introduction

# He Will Strike Your Head: The Story of Salvation

The great news of the Scripture is that God saves. He creates, redeems, and restores. Salvation stands at the center of the Christian message. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, it may seem that evil won, but even at this moment, a promise emerges—He will strike the head of the serpent. Tragedy does not win. The history of the Bible begins with creation and it ends with a vision of a new heaven and earth. Therefore, the last word of the Bible is not judgment, but salvation. The story of salvation extends beyond Genesis to embrace the entire narrative of Scripture. The purpose of the next several paragraphs is to place creation, the fall, violence, flood, and Babel in the grand narrative of God's grace. The clear message of the Christian faith is that God strikes the head of evil by providing peace and redemption. The history of salvation depicted in the scriptural narrative should inspire the church to announce the gospel to the ends of the earth.

### *Setting the Context*

The Bible begins with the story of creation. God brings existence from nothingness and light from the darkness. The biblical narrative affirms the utter dependence of creation upon God. Evil flees from God by declaring independence. This lie destroys. This is the exact opposite of what God accomplishes. Evil/sin brings nothing back into view, maybe chaos, but certainly violence. Existence testifies to the power and graciousness of God. The Garden of Eden symbolizes the eternal peace intended by God for all creation. A crafty serpent comes alongside Eve to cast doubt on God's prohibition regarding the tree in the middle of the garden. He whispers that the real reason for the command is that God fears they will be like Him. Their disobedience leads to disruption, but even in this dark moment, a promise emerges. The serpent's temptation changes everything except God's plan of salvation. The second Adam will strike the head of the serpent. He loses.

The story continues with the sad account of Cain's murder of his brother Abel. The gift of life turns toward death in the hands of human beings. Unfortunately, the spiral of violence and wickedness continues to the point that God regrets creating human beings. A great flood wipes almost all life from the face of the earth. God saves Noah and his family because of his righteousness. Later the scriptural narrative adds another sad account—the Tower of Babel. Here the sinful pride of human endeavors to build a tower to heaven. They want to make a name for themselves to resist being scattered.

This displeased God and their language is confused, resulting in the very future the people hoped to avoid.

This cursory review presents a discouraging picture of humanity. God declared the world good, but humans turned it into a place of violence, wickedness, and strife. Thank God, there is more!

### *The Scriptural Theology of Salvation*

The story of salvation fills the pages of the Scripture. One of the most well-known parables in the New Testament concerns the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This image provides a vivid depiction of sin and its effects. The son squanders his father's money and ends up in a far country. The parable paints a picture of the helplessness of sin. The message of the gospel is that God has taken on flesh and entered the far country to redeem. Salvation comes at an extreme cost. The following markers of God's intention to save provide a place for us to see the glory of what God does in Christ.

**Creation.** The first words of the Bible speak about God creating the heavens and the earth. This is the first moment of salvation. In the face of nothingness, the word of God brings life.

A theology of redemption and reconciliation established the re-creation of God. Just as nothingness gives way to being, God creates a being with a human face in the image of His creator. The fellowship that God enjoys in His nature extends to the creation. The light of creation never dies even in the darkest moments of history. The still and often quiet voice of salvation is always present.

**Election.** The story of salvation continues with the call of Abram. He is to leave the familiar to embrace the yet unknown. A great nation will follow. Abraham's name will be great and God will bless all the families of the earth through his faithfulness. The message to Abraham is, "You are mine." For all those who felt alone and alienated, the good news is that they belonged to God.

The word of God pierces through the clatter and darkness of the world. Abraham is merely human, but God chooses to bless the world through him. Salvation means that in our freedom, we are witness to God's grace. Israel's promise arises at the moment Abraham leaves Ur. God often takes what the world finds insignificant, and seemingly useless, to build great nations. God's promise of relationship always unfolds in history.

**Exodus.** The Hebrews end up in Egypt because God saved them from starvation. After many years of their freedom, they become slaves. The pharaoh who invited Joseph and his family dies. A new

leader comes to the throne who had little appreciation for the Hebrews. The vast number of Hebrews in the land threaten the pharaoh. An order goes out to throw all newborn male slaves into the Nile. A child is born named Moses. His mother fashions a basket and gently floats him into the Nile instead of throwing him into the river. The pharaoh's daughter retrieves the basket and raises the young boy who will lead God's people. As an adult, Moses will lead the Hebrews out of bondage and into freedom. This image of deliverance runs throughout the Bible.

**Covenant.** A covenant names a relationship. In this case, the relationship is between God and the Hebrews. The covenant between God and Abraham promises unconditional blessing. A barren couple at an advanced age will have a child. From this, all the nations of the earth will look to Abraham. Paul presents Abraham as a symbol of faith. Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt and through the Red Sea—exodus. The Ten Commandments are the most obvious part of the Mosaic Covenant, but the underlying theme is a relationship intended to bless the people. Simply put, if God's people obey the commandments, God will bless them richly.

**Captivity and Restoration.** The sad reality of the plan of salvation is that the people of God did not obey the law. This led to moral and spiritual deterioration in Israel and Judah. The Assyrians (Israel-722 BC), then the Babylonians (Judah-587 BC), took God's people into captivity. Their failure contributed to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple. Yet God's judgment is never the last word in our story.

Cyrus, King of Persia, decrees in 538 BC that Jews can return to Judah. This is another moment in the story of salvation.

**Jesus.** The promise of the ages becomes flesh with the birth of Jesus to a young mother (Mary) and a carpenter (Joseph). Jesus refers to himself as the kingdom of God in the presence of people. God becomes flesh and tabernacles (dwells) among people. He came as the final defeat of the power of sin and death.

The Romans, at the instigation of many Jews, crucify Jesus between two common thieves. On the third day, Jesus steps out of the tomb, a victor over the power of sin and death. Paul declares in Romans that this is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). The cross may be foolishness to the Greeks and an obstacle for Jews, but it is the power of salvation.

**Pentecost.** After Jesus ascends to His Father, the disciples gather in an upper room to pray. When the Holy Spirit arrives, the men demonstrate a new boldness.

Peter preaches and three thousand believed unto salvation. The

church is born as the gospel spread across the ancient world. The gift of the Spirit is boldness and clarity regarding Jesus. Pentecost inaugurates a new chapter in the story of salvation.

**Consummation.** The story of salvation with the promise of Christ's return. The reign of Satan ends. Revelation 21 declares a new heaven and earth. The holy city, the New Jerusalem, comes down. All things become new. History ends, but the story of God's grace never will. Clearly, the church lives in the in-between times. The life between the first and second coming of Christ offers time for believers to evangelize. Most of all, the blessed hope offered by Jesus provides encouragement and hope for the world. The closing prayer of the Bible brings everything into focus—"Come Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20b)! This prayer arises from a profound sense that God intends to save.

When Christians tell history, it is a story of salvation. God's existence is an eternal invitation. The Scripture does not flinch at the depravity of humankind. Yet the message of the Christian tradition is that what human beings could not do, God accomplishes in Jesus Christ.

Many theologians in the history of the church have reflected on salvation history. Karl Barth, was one of the most significant theologians of the 20th century. His *Church Dogmatics* tells the story of salvation with power and clarity. "God with us" signals the divine intention that comes to where we are in order to reconcile us to Him. Barth reminds us that God becomes the means of redemption. He uses the term reconciliation to emphasize that salvation concerns a resumption of fellowship. Human beings are field upon that God plays out his reconciling love. The scripture reminds us that God offers salvation to the entire cosmos. Barth defines reconciliation clearly as, "God's crossing the frontier to man: supremely legitimate and yet supremely inconceivable or conceivable only in the fact of His act of power and love" (IV.1, 82). Paul speaks to reconciliation. He affirms that God has reconciled in Christ Jesus and called the church to a ministry of reconciliation. He even goes on to write that we are ambassadors for extending reconciliation to a divided world. We will never know the peace of the Garden of Eden, but salvation means that Christ calls us to participate in God's ongoing agenda for reconciliation.

Blessed be those who accept God's salvation and become His ambassadors!

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