

The Saviour of the World

a Biblical theology of mission

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God so loved the world

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). For Bible-believing Christians, this is the assurance on which our faith is built.

In this wonderful declaration we see the whole world loved, the whole world perishing, and the whole world waiting – waiting to hear, to believe and to receive eternal life. We see the love of God extending beyond the twelve tribes of Israel, beyond our own familiar churches, embracing all the earth with a glorious purpose to save men, women and children from every tribe and tongue. The disciples of Jesus were all convinced of this. “We have seen and testify,” they said, “that the Father has sent his Son to be *the Saviour of the world*” (1 Jn 4:14).

To save the world was the Creator’s desire from the beginning. The earliest promise given to Abraham extended far beyond his own family and the tents they pitched in the wilderness of the Negeb. The Lord told him, “In you *all the families of the earth* shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3). And again, “In your offspring *all the nations of the earth* shall be blessed” (Gen 26:4). Every family and every nation are included in this promise. It embraces all mankind. Not one race or tribe or people or tongue is excluded from the blessing promised to Abraham.

And yet in the days of Abraham there was no sign of this promise being fulfilled. In the days of his sons and grandsons there was no blessing for the nations of the world. In fact 700 years would pass before serious thought was given to helping people of other cultures, languages and beliefs. Then Joshua observed how the waters of the Jordan were held back “so that *all the peoples of the earth* may know that the hand of Yahweh is mighty” (Joshua 4:24).

After that 300 more years went by before Solomon, praying at the dedication of his Temple, turned his thoughts to the nations of the world: “When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name’s sake... hear in heaven your dwelling place and do

whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that *all the peoples of the earth* may know your name and fear you” (1 Ki 8:41-43).

During this long period there had been poets and singers in Israel who spoke of God’s glory extending to “the peoples”, to “all nations” and even to “the ends of the earth”. The prophets, too, heard Yahweh himself declaring, “Turn to me and be saved, *all you ends of the earth*” (Is 45:22). In such moments of poetic insight, devotion, faith and expectation, there were beautiful thoughts expressed concerning the peoples of the earth, but the reality of daily life for the nation of Israel was actually quite different.

Be separate

The Old Testament describes how Yahweh repeatedly instructed the Israelites to be separate from people of other races and beliefs, to avoid at all costs the contamination of false gods and unclean food. The writers offer a long and bloody account of violent conflict with the surrounding tribes, nations and empires. There is a stark and shocking contrast between the high poetic ideal of distant nations seeking to know the Lord and the harsh reality of ambushes, stratagems and slaughters against neighbouring peoples in the struggle to gain and retain land.

After ten plagues and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army, the Israelites were glad to escape from Egypt; there was no *blessing* there for the Egyptians or for them. At Sinai they had a wonderful encounter with Yahweh and received his covenant, but the Law contained no command to teach the nations about him. It was specifically said of the Passover meal that “no foreigner shall eat of it” (Ex 12:43).

Approaching the borders of the Promised Land, they were not encouraged to mix with the Canaanites who lived there, or to teach them the ways of the Lord. On the contrary Yahweh told them, “I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites” (Ex 33:2). There was no *blessing* for these families, but only fear and grief with the loss of homes and fields and the death of their loved ones in battle: “You shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as Yahweh your God has commanded, so they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods” (Deut 20:17-18).

Then occupying the land, the Israelites were forbidden to mix with neighbouring people of alien races and religions. “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods” (1 Ki 11:2). The sacrifices and offerings

prescribed in the Law were for the Israelites alone: “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of Yahweh” (Deut 23:3).

Throughout these generations, Israel was deliberately prevented from being a blessing to the nations, for at the beginning the Lord said, “I am Yahweh your God, who has *separated* you from the peoples” (Lev 20:24). And still to the end they were commanded, “*Separate* yourselves from the peoples of the land” (Ezra 10:11).

But despite the painful conflict and separation, the Law anticipated that a foreigner might sometimes be found in the land of Israel and wish to serve the God of the Jews. If a Gentile were willing to keep the Law, and to be circumcised (in the case of a man), he would be allowed to live free from exploitation and oppression among the tribes of Israel, to hear the word of the Lord, and at a later date to worship in the Court of the Gentiles (Ex 12:48-49; Num 15:14-16).

But in order to benefit from the covenant with the Jews, to participate in the essential sacrifices and offerings, and to maintain himself in ritual purity, a Gentile convert to Judaism must live in the land of Israel, or travel constantly to Israel – to the Temple, the priests, the altars and washing places, and the teachers of the Law in Jerusalem. This meant that only a very small number of people outside Israel committed themselves to the God of the Jews. And within Israel itself there were so few that the Court of the Gentiles became a common market instead of a place for prayer.

How are we to understand all this? If the Lord God loves the world and desires to *bless* every nation, it may seem very strange that he would single out one race to be his people and then separate them from all others. It will seem even stranger that their history would then consist of constant warfare with surrounding tribes and end with humiliating desecration beneath the heel of a pagan power. So what came of the promise to bless “all the families of the earth” and “all the nations of the earth”?

The Bible shows us that Abraham did not see the promise fulfilled in his lifetime, nor did Moses or David or Solomon, or any of the prophets, priests and kings. But one man did. His name was John and this is what he saw: “I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, *from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb... crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev 7:9-10).

He saw it in a vision at the very end of the Bible, describing the very end of the world in its present form. In John’s vision, the promise to Abraham has finally been fulfilled. Salvation has reached the ends of the earth. But

how will it happen? How will the nations receive the blessing promised to Abraham? That is the question we must now consider.

The pain of the world

First of all, we must look carefully at the promise itself. Yahweh told Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be *blessed*.” And again, “In your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be *blessed*.”

Now what does it mean to be blessed? Think for a moment what blessings you and your family might desire above all other blessings. What are the greatest and most wonderful blessings that humankind could wish for?

We might say the greatest blessing would be peace, or food, or security or health, or perhaps forgiveness and acceptance with God. But our most basic need is, of course, for life itself. If every other difficulty and danger could be overcome, there still stands ahead of us that “last enemy” with power to destroy us all (1 Cor 15:26). If we are dead, there is no other blessing that can help us.

We are all subject to death and the terrible afflictions that lead inevitably and painfully to death. We live in a world of famines, epidemics, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and fires. We are troubled by human greed, hatred, war and cruel oppression. The greatest blessing we can possibly imagine would be freedom from death and the horrible diseases, disasters, damage and decay that bring us sooner or later to the grave.

Death and its fierce allies are so familiar that we cannot easily imagine a world without these terrible adversities. But they were not there in the beginning, and they will not be there at the end. When he created the earth, “God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). And one day in the future, “there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain” (Rev 21:4).

The world we live in was once perfect, and it will be perfect once again. So how and why did it go wrong? And how will it be put right?

Paradise lost

“Yahweh is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works” (Ps 145:17). Aware of this, we can be sure our Lord created the earth and everything in it with perfect wisdom and loving care. As our earliest ancestors explored the world around them, they saw it was “very good” (Gen 1:31). It was indeed a paradise.

Then, according to the Genesis account, they conceived a ridiculous and reckless desire to know *both good and evil*. They seemed to imagine that a knowledge of evil would make them wise (Gen 3:6). The Lord God allowed

them to have their wish, to seize the forbidden fruit, and so evil entered in, corrupting all creation.

From then on, they and their descendants would have this devastating knowledge of both good and evil. Every day they would see the Lord God working for good... and every day, powers of destruction working for evil.

Yahweh had warned them plainly, “The day you eat of it you will surely die” (Gen 2:17), and indeed we know “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

From the moment when they seized a knowledge of evil, our first parents began to die. Every organ in their bodies started to age, to wear out, to stiffen and contract. They became vulnerable to disease and susceptible to damage that could not be repaired. The Lord God said, “Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:19). Humanity became subject to death, and we have been dying ever since (Rom 5:12-14).

This is often called the Fall of Man. It was devastating to them and to us. But in the Genesis account there are three particular things to note. Firstly, despite Adam’s disobedience, the Lord God came looking for him. Adam learned that Yahweh himself has the heart of a missionary – compassionate and concerned, not content to abandon us in our folly and our need.

Secondly, although the Lord cursed the earth and the devil, he never cursed Adam or Eve. His love for them and their children remained unchanged.

But thirdly, we are shown – so carefully described – the world we live in now (Gen 3:16-19). As sons and daughters of Adam, we battle with the earth and with evil. A man knows what it is to face “thorns and thistles” and “painful toil”. His wife endures “labour in childbearing”. Their marriage is marred by issues of dependence and control. They endure disease, damage and decay, and eventually and tragically... they die.

A list is recorded of Adam’s children and grandchildren, and each is carefully named, noting his offspring and his age, and each ends with the mournful words “and then he died” (Gen 5). The physical and mental disintegration of a human being is a shocking thing to happen to men and women made in the image of God, alive on the surface of planet earth, and fully aware of what is happening to them and it.

Throughout human history, the created world has longed desperately to be “liberated from its bondage to decay” (Rom 8:21). Every generation suffers catastrophes, epidemics, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and fires, warfare, hunger, guilt, hatred and cruel oppression. The knowledge of good and evil is a crushing burden to us, yet still we feel obliged to hear the world news every day.

At the same time we yearn hopelessly for some way to regain what we have lost. With gardens, houses, hospitals and hotels, we endeavour to create Eden once more on the scarred surface of planet earth. But nothing can restore the paradise we have squandered. We are crumbling away and will end as dust. Death will finally destroy us all.

This is our universal human experience – we know what it is like. And yet the Lord God has not abandoned us entirely to our fate. At times, indeed, he has intervened to give his people fresh hope, rescuing them from trouble and showing them a better way to live. Those who were there at the time remembered what was done and wrote it down. It is recorded for us in the pages of the Bible.

The longing for security

From the start, the bitterness of failure was sweetened by a wonderful promise: the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15).

As Eve suffers the pains of childbirth and delivers her first baby, she must have hoped with intense desire, asking herself again and again: “Is this the one who will *crush the serpent’s head and rid the world of pain*? Can this child somehow undo our terrible mistake and restore what we have lost?”

Before long there comes a second child. Then Cain, her firstborn, rises up and kills his brother, and that bright hope is shattered.

Yet perhaps all is not lost... *if the murderer can be sent away*, far from the other children of Adam and Eve. But the jealousy and anger that corrupted Cain is found in others too, and within a few short years all mankind has gone the way of Cain.

Perhaps everything will be put right *if the wickedness of the world is washed away in a great flood* – then the godly descendants of Noah can start afresh to occupy its fields and plains and serve the Lord. But soon they are massed in a great city called Babel, establishing a religious tyranny with a great tower reaching to the heavens.

Perhaps all may yet be well *if they are scattered in separate tribes and families* far apart. But soon there is fighting between families and tribes, with anger, hatred, lying and cheating, perversion, corruption and cruel oppression. In many places are famines, poverty and hunger. Their bodies still get damaged and diseased, and still they get old and die. We see all this in the book of Genesis.

Perhaps *if one faithful man can raise a godly family*, dwelling in tents far from cities and temples and conflicts over land, then all may yet be well, at least for them. But Abraham lives in hard times among dangerous neighbours. He has to fight and deceive in order to be safe. His grandsons

tell more lies, do more fighting and sell their brother into slavery. Before long their descendants are all toiling as slaves in a foreign land.

Then perhaps all will be well *if they are rescued from slavery* and led into open country with their flocks and herds. But there they are soon complaining and arguing among themselves and wishing they were back in the land of Egypt.

Perhaps all will be well *if they are given a system of Law*, accepted by all, showing them how to live and please the Lord their God. But even as Moses brings the tablets down the mountain, they are making an idol, breaking the commandments, and bringing upon themselves a terrible slaughter and a plague.

Perhaps all will be well *if they are offered a land flowing with milk and honey*. But there the Law is soon forgotten, the tribes beset by anarchy and fear – everyone doing what is right in his own eyes. More wars and famines follow with more anger, hatred, lying and cheating, perversion, corruption and cruel tyranny. They still suffer diseases, deformities and disasters; they still get old and weak, and every one sooner or later dies. The book of Judges describes it in tragic detail.

Then perhaps all will be well *if there is a king with power to enforce the Law* and defend the nation. But Saul himself becomes cruel and disobedient, David kills a man and steals his wife, and soon the rulers of Israel are worshipping Baal and Ashtoreth. The tribes are split between rival kings and engulfed in civil war.

Perhaps all will be well *if prophets are sent to warn them* so they will understand and begin to seek the Lord. But their ears are closed, their hearts hardened against the word of God. They kill the prophets and stone those sent to them.

Perhaps *if they are crushed and deported to a foreign land*, a new and better generation may later return to restore the glory of Zion. But Ezra and Nehemiah, rebuilding the Temple and the walls, teaching the Law and driving out the foreign wives, see their best efforts break down with anger and frustration (Neh 13). They can do no more than prepare Jerusalem for the violence of Herod, the political intrigues of priests and Sadducees, and the petty bullying of Pharisees and scribes.

The Israelites were privileged beyond any other people. They had every possible advantage. The Lord God himself provided, instructed, warned and intervened for their sake. Yet the history of Israel is a tortuous and tragic account of failure and disappointment. That is how it was seen by Nehemiah and by Stephen, and how the Lord God himself described it: “What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it?” (Neh 9, Acts 7; Is 5:4-7; see also Ps 106; Ezek 20).

Every summary of Israel’s history in scripture is profoundly painful. Throughout their generations, they suffered wars, famines, lying and cheating, corruption and cruel tyranny. They endured disease, disaster, decay and death. Their covenant could not save them from sin or the deadly consequences of sin. Their Law could not change their human nature or offer assurance of eternal life.

And if the history of Israel was so painful, we may be sure that the history of every other nation was infinitely more painful, for they had no covenant, no promises, no divine Law and no prophets to guide them in the ways of the Lord. We cannot condemn the Israelites when our own history is undoubtedly far worse.

So we come to the end of the Old Testament. Everything has been tried, and everything has failed. Nothing could restore the world – or even one small part of it – to harmony and security, to health and peace, to the way it was in the beginning. No one could re-create the garden of Eden on the scarred and ruined face of planet earth.

The dawn of salvation

The Bible concludes that “Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking” (Rom 11:7). And what exactly was Israel seeking? Throughout their long history, the twelve tribes were constantly and desperately seeking *safety*. Mothers, fathers and children needed to be safe from sin and the deadly consequences of sin – to be safe from disease, disaster, decay and death. Their need was for salvation. As one of them declared, “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be *saved*” (Rom 10:1).

The Hebrew word for salvation is *yeshuah* (yešûēāh).¹ The word *yeshuah* signifies rescue, deliverance, protection, relief. It means safety from danger and destruction, from disease and death. Israel desperately and urgently needed *yeshuah*.

And *yeshuah* is, of course, the name of Jesus. Jacob said, “I have waited for your *yeshuah* O Lord” (Gen 49:18). David said, “I have hoped for your *yeshuah*,” and again, “I have longed for your *yeshuah*” (Ps 119:166, 174). Isaiah said: “Yahweh is my strength and my song, and he has become my *yeshuah*” (Is 12:2). And looking into the distant future, Yahweh himself declared, “I will make you as a light for the nations, that my *yeshuah* may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

The word *yeshuah* was translated into Greek as *sōtēria*, and so the Jewish concept of salvation was carried through to the New Testament. Here we

¹ The character ε is a Semitic consonant (εayn), sounding like a long a (in the back of the throat).

read that “God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain *salvation* through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:9). When Zacchaeus was forgiven and transformed, Jesus declared, “Today *salvation* has come to this house” (Lk 19:9). When a woman of the city was set free from sin, he said, “Your faith has *saved* you; go in peace” (Lk 7:50). Peter, who saw what was happening, witnessed the dawn of “a *salvation* ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet 1:5). And this salvation was something that only Jesus Christ could bring: “There is *salvation* in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

As the Old Testament history of Israel draws to a close, we begin to see a dramatic change of mood and expectation. The prophets start to speak of a wonderful hope, a great event that lies ahead, a new age in the future: “The days are coming, declares Yahweh, when I will make a *new covenant*... I will put my law within them, and I will write it *on their hearts*... for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares Yahweh. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will *remember their sin no more*” (Jer 31:31-34).

Then, as hope dies for the creation of a godly nation, a fresh vision appears for a godly company within it – a faithful remnant, ones and twos, here and there, longing for the Lord to visit and redeem his people, and preparing themselves to receive him when he comes.

These were the men and women who recognised Jesus when he appeared and knew he was the Saviour. One was Simeon who took the child in his arms and said, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your *salvation* that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:29-32). Another was Anna: “Coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). A little later John the Baptist would point him out: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who *takes away the sin of the world!*” (Jn 1:29).

Salvation – *yeshuah* – so long awaited, came at last to the streets and fields of Galilee and Judea. Granting sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, he cleansed the lepers, restored the paralysed, freed the oppressed, forgave the guilty, transformed the wicked, and even raised the dead. For the first time in the history of the world, the deepest and most desperate needs of men and women were being met. The Kingdom of Heaven had come on earth, and Israel had begun at last to obtain what it was seeking.

Paradise regained

Yet Jesus did not travel far and he did not stay for long. His work of healing and restoration was brought to a sudden halt by his cruel death.

But that was not the end of him as some might think. The miracles observed in one small place were “signs” showing *who he is*, what he *can do*, and what he *will do* when he comes back to earth. In Galilee and Judea he removed the wages of sin from a few people in a small place for a short time. When he comes again he will remove sin and every consequence of sin from all the earth forever. Indeed, “according to his promise, we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

As the disciples watched Jesus ascending to his Father, the angel said, “Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). He is coming back to earth.

And when he does, his home will be among us and we will be his people. “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” So he declares, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:4-5).

It is not in the clouds that we will live forever but on this planet earth, renewed and redeemed from everything that spoils... set free from its bondage to corruption and decay.

When Jesus comes, all who have put their trust in him will be saved completely and for ever. We will inherit eternal life in a new and perfect world, and receive new bodies perfectly suited to live in it. This is our great hope and expectation. When he comes, “all mankind shall see the *salvation* of God” (Lk 3:6).

So we live by faith, trusting completely in the One we long to see: “Our citizenship is in heaven, and *from it we await a Saviour*, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20).

The purpose of the Old Testament

If that is so, what is the purpose of the Old Testament? Why did the Lord God take such trouble over Abraham, Moses and the twelve tribes? Why was he so intensely involved with David, the prophets, the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem? Why do we have all this history in our Bibles? What value does it possess for Christian people?

The entire Old Testament has one simple God-given purpose. Its function is to show us how desperately we need a Saviour – a Saviour who can truly

save. That is the lesson of the Old Testament for Israel and for the nations of the world.

Its writers depict the earth as we know it, wracked by sorrow, selfishness, anger and despair. Its pages recount a succession of attempts to try and resolve the problems that we face. Each remedy was proposed and undertaken with high hopes, but each in turn failed to save the world from its terrible bondage to disaster, deformity, disease, decay and death.

The Old Testament narrates the breakdown of every effort to meet mankind's deepest needs. Its writers faithfully describe each tragic act, recording the disappointments and frustrations of patriarchs, judges, prophets, priests and kings. Having seen every hope of salvation fail, we must reach the point of despair before we can rise to the joy and appreciate the wonder of the one who can truly save. The Old Testament raises every question that human beings may ask, but for answers they must wait till Jesus comes to the hills and streets of Galilee and Judea.

The Law had proved unable to put things right. No sacrifice or offering could atone for a deliberate offence or cleanse a wicked man, as David knew full well, casting himself upon the mercy of the Lord his God (Ps 51:1-3, 16). Priests and prophets could give no hope to a robber justly crucified for his crimes or a paralysed man laid on the ground with his sins still unforgiven. There was no help or comfort for a beggar born deaf or blind, for a widow mourning her only son, or for a home where a young girl has just died. There was no hope for a man with leprosy, an outcast tormented by a legion of demons, or a woman unclean with a constant loss of blood. The Law could do nothing for them; the prophets, priests and kings could do nothing for them. Jesus alone could meet their deepest needs and save them from their danger and distress. And he alone could prepare a place for them in a new world without tears or pain or death.

That is the message of the Old Testament. So we read, "the Law has become a *paidagōgos* leading us to Christ" (Gal 3:24).

A *paidagōgos* was a teacher or guardian appointed to instruct young children. He would teach them the life skills – the social skills, the physical and intellectual skills – that they would need in order to succeed in the adult world. On these terms, the Israelites were spiritual children, learning what they would need to know for a time of adulthood that yet lay in the future, preparing for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and the coming of the Saviour.

Their scriptures provided all the wisdom they would need in order to know the Saviour when he came. So we read of Timothy, familiar from childhood with the sacred Old Testament writings, "which are able to make you wise for *salvation* through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15).

Those who understood this great lesson of scripture, and accepted it with all their heart, were the ones who recognised Jesus when he came. Those who felt most deeply the bitterness of sin and death were most ready for the sweetness of the Saviour and eternal life. Those who saw most clearly the failure of every other effort were quickest to appreciate what Jesus alone could do.

Proclaiming Christ

We have thought of the promise given to Abraham: "In your *offspring* shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen 22:18). The immediate offspring of Abraham were Ishmael and Isaac, but the nations of the world were never blessed through them. The children and grandchildren of Ishmael and Isaac might be as numerous as the stars, but the nations were not blessed through them. Among the descendants of Abraham there was one, and only one, through whom all nations could be blessed. So indeed the scriptures teach: "The promises were made to Abraham and to his *offspring*. It does not say, 'to offsprings', referring to many, but 'to your offspring', referring to one, *who is Christ*" (Gal 3:16).

The promised offspring of Abraham is Jesus Christ. Through him alone the nations will be blessed. He is the only one who can solve the problems of the world. And that is why we proclaim "the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mk 1:1). We tell the world what he has done, and what he is doing now, and what he will do when he comes back.

The whole Bible testifies to this great truth – that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour. In the Old Testament we see *our need of salvation*. In the Gospels we see *his ability to save*. In the Acts and Letters we learn how to *depend on him as Saviour*. In the Revelation we see his followers from every tribe and tongue finally and permanently *saved*.

No one else can do it. Jesus alone could still the wind and waves, forgive the guilty, cleanse the diseased, raise the dead and instantly restore the disabled to perfect health. Having shown he could do all this, he then forged a new and everlasting covenant in his blood – a better covenant, with better promises, written not on stone but on human hearts, to change us from the inside out – a covenant promising eternal life to all who will put their trust in him (Heb 8:6-7).

For a few brief years, the Kingdom of Heaven was seen on earth. It came to a small place for a short time. But when he returns, his Kingdom will come everywhere and for all eternity. As he comes on the clouds with power and great glory, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. Every form of evil will be swept away and at last "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"

(Hab 2:14). When Jesus comes in his Kingdom, the entire earth will once again enjoy the peace and purity of Eden, and we will live in this paradise forever (Rev 21; Is 11:1-10; 35; 65:17-25).

It is Jesus alone who can do this for us. *That is why “We proclaim Christ!”* (Col 1:28). Our missionary task, our apostolic calling, is to make it known to the ends of the earth... to help people from every tribe and tongue obtain salvation by putting all their trust in him.

Israel and the nations

So far we have seen how the nation of Israel was gradually prepared for the coming of the Saviour. But what of the Gentiles? How about the other nations of the world?

Throughout her long history, there was very little that Israel could do for the Philistines, Egyptians, Assyrians and other Gentile races beyond her borders, and this for three reasons.

Firstly, as we have seen, the Israelites themselves had *no salvation*, and therefore nothing of value to offer the Gentiles. Israel indeed had the same problems as every other nation, and no answer to those problems. To the end of the Old Testament there are still wars and famines, anger, hatred, lying and cheating, perversion, corruption and cruel tyranny; people still get old and sick and die. Israel had no relief from sin and the consequences of sin, no Holy Spirit to transform the character of her people and no promise of eternal life beyond the cold dark grave. Without a Saviour, Israel herself had no salvation.

Secondly, Israel had *no missionary call*. She was never at any time given a programme for world mission. The prophets rebuked Israel for many failings, but never for failing to go and teach the nations. The LORD’s song could not be sung in a strange land; the songs of Zion could only be sung in Jerusalem (Ps 137:3-4).

The Old Testament itself was simply a covenant between Yahweh and the twelve tribes. If Israel kept the Law, Yahweh would bless Israel. He gave her priests and kings but no evangelists or apostles. His purpose was not for the Israelites to go, but simply to be: “You shall *be* my treasured possession among all peoples... you shall *be* to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6). Moses was never instructed to send out teachers of the Law with instruments of circumcision to every tribe and tongue. Ezekiel’s ministry in Babylon was “not to a people of foreign speech” but to his own compatriots in exile (Ezek 3:4-5). Without a gospel of salvation, Israel had no mission to undertake.

Thirdly, the nations *already had a covenant* of their own. The rabbis taught and still teach that Gentiles are acceptable to Yahweh on the basis of

his covenant with Noah. As the peoples of the world have Noah’s covenant, there is no *need* for them to add the covenant of Moses. And if they agreed to keep the Law of Moses, life would only become more complicated and more difficult for them.¹

As we have seen, the covenant with Israel deliberately separated her from the nations, protecting the chosen race from the defilement of pagan ritual, sexual depravity and occult powers. The requirements of the Law, followed by a long history of racial conflict, served to raise a massive dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles.

Proclaiming Christ crucified

That is how things were at the time of Jesus’ birth. Under the Old Covenant he could offer nothing to the Gentiles except the Law. He declared, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). He told his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans” (Matt 10:5). A Canaanite woman pleaded for help but he did not answer her a word (Matt 15:23). A man of the Gerasenes begged to go with him but was sent away (Lk 8:38). Some Greeks asked to see him but his soul was troubled and his thoughts turned instead to a grain of wheat that must fall into the ground and die (Jn 12:20-27).

As yet he had nothing of value to offer these needy people. Only a new covenant in his blood would open the Kingdom of God to every tribe and tongue. Only when he is lifted up can he draw all people to himself (Jn 12:32). Only as he bears the crown of thorns can the curse be lifted from the earth. Only by dying will he “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (Heb 2:14-15). Only when the grain of wheat is buried will it yield a harvest among the Greeks. Only as the price is paid, and the Spirit released, will all nations be able to seek and find peace with God. Only then would the dividing wall be broken down, uniting Jew and Gentile in a new fellowship of faith (Eph 2:14-15).

Only after he has risen from the grave can he say, “Go into all the world.” Only then can Israel become “a light to the nations”. Only then can a Gentile and his family hear the words, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). Only then is there news so good that all the world must hear it.

¹ Maimonides (12th Century), *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 8:11. The covenant with Noah is said to consist of seven commands and a promise (Gen 9:11-17), which makes it much simpler than the 613 legal requirements in the Law of Moses (Babylonian Talmud, *Makkot* 23b-24a). For primary sources see Wikipedia: “Seven Laws of Noah”; www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/seven-laws-of-noah/

It is the death of Christ which atones for the sin of the world, securing salvation for all who will put their trust in him. That is why “we proclaim Christ *crucified!*” (1 Cor 1:23). Until everyone knows this, there is nothing else worth knowing (1 Cor 2:2).

Israel and the church

But can we so easily dismiss the faith of ancient Israel? Is it not true that Abraham and others were justified by faith? Surely it is written, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Rom 4:3). And if we teach our people to have the faith of Abraham, will they not be justified as he was?

Without any doubt the faith of Abraham pleased God. And, like him, many others in Old Testament times were *justified* by faith. Yet the truth remains: not one of them received *salvation*. Not one was brought to safety from the deadly consequences of sin. The fact that they all *died* is proof of that.

So we read, “These all died in faith, *not having received the things promised*, but having seen them and greeted them from afar” (Heb 11:13). The Old Testament saints, justified by faith, must wait to receive *salvation*, with us, through a new and better covenant in Christ. “All these, though commended for their faith, *did not receive what had been promised*, since God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they attain their goal” (Heb 11:39-40).

We have seen that Israel had no missionary call. It is difficult, in any case, to imagine what the Israelites might offer to the nations. They had nothing to suggest except a Law which they themselves could not keep and sacrifices that could never atone for deliberate sin. In this present life, they had no way of making bad men good. After death they could envisage no more than a shadowy existence confined to a ghostly underworld.

As Christian missionaries we can offer far more than Abraham and the patriarchs ever knew. We have a better covenant than Moses could imagine, and better promises than any of the prophets could foresee. We belong, not to the kingdom of David or Solomon, but to a Kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28). We are New Testament people with a New Testament gospel, and we learn it from the New Testament.

When the Bible is printed as a single book, we may too easily assume it teaches the same things from beginning to end. But the Bible has two parts. The first part describes a covenant which is “obsolete, old and ready to vanish away” (Heb 8:13). The second offers a new covenant which is eternal (Heb 13:20). Our pastors and teachers have a responsibility to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). By failing to distinguish

between the Old Testament and the New, we run the risk of teaching our people to live as Israelites rather than as Christians.

There are significant differences between the nation of Israel and the Church of Christ. Israel was a political state, created by conquest, occupying a designated territory, controlled by a government, depending on the threat and use of force to keep its people safe from invasion by enemies and subversion by evildoers. It lasted several hundred years and ended with failure. But the Church is quite different. It is a spiritual movement active in all the earth, teaching compassion and forgiveness through the Holy Spirit, and preparing men, women and children for life in a better world that will last forever.

There are two Testaments. The first shows us mankind in desperate need of a Saviour; the second shows us what it means to be saved. The difference between them is Jesus Christ. The Old Testament shows us the best of all possible religions without Christ, but it does not show us how to solve the problems of the world. And it does not teach Christians how to live. As followers of Jesus we do not send plagues like Moses, or attack cities like Joshua, or slay Philistines like David, or build altars like Jacob or Elijah, or offer lambs in the Temple like the priests and Levites.

The Old Testament does not teach us how to relieve the suffering of planet earth. Abraham could not save the world, nor could Moses or David or the prophets. They could do nothing to make the earth a better place. They did not receive what was promised. Their bitter experience simply shows how desperately they needed Christ.

The message of this salvation

We face difficulties in mission because some Christians, and even some pastors, do not understand the purpose of the Old Testament. They have not seen that the Old Testament is simply an elementary teacher preparing us to enter the school of Christ. They ask us to follow the example of Joseph, Joshua, Daniel and Nehemiah, not realising that everything changed when the Saviour came. They want us to keep the Ten Commandments rather than the Sermon on the Mount. They teach us to follow the Law of Moses rather than the instructions of Christ and his apostles. They expect us to live like patriarchs and kings, not as evangelists and teachers of gospel truth. Some do not understand what the gospel is. They are sending missionaries who do not know the gospel. And this has three serious consequences.

Firstly, when pastors and missionaries preach and teach from the Old Testament, we too often hear a “social gospel” or an “economic gospel” or a “political gospel”, because the old covenant, of course, could offer nothing more. We see the history of Israel misused to justify political

religion, promoting revolution or tyranny or democracy or development or even war. High value is placed on possessions, land, luxuries, status and success. Singing and praying about overcoming and destroying, our children may even learn to hate and fear people of other races or beliefs, never learning to love them and lead them to faith in Christ.

Secondly, it is evident that many evangelical churches copy the religious fashion of the Jewish Temple, with brilliant rituals and ceremonies conducted by skilled musicians and priests dressed in robes. Erecting a magnificent building, they wait for people to come and worship. But Jesus did not build a temple; he did not become a priest. He just went out and talked to people where they were. He took his apostles into fields and streets and homes, and then sent them into all the world to make disciples. As they testified and taught in many lands, they did not appoint musicians or invite people to attend worship services with choirs and ceremonies. They proclaimed good news in public places and taught believers in their simple homes. They explained to all who would listen what Jesus Christ has done, what he is doing and what he will do when he comes again.

But the biggest problem of all is this. Church-goers with an Old Testament faith may live and die without a Saviour. Taught to be like Moses or David, they are unaware that they must be born again. Taught to be like Sarah or Rebecca, they see no need to put their trust in Christ. Teaching them from the Old Testament, we may fail to teach the essential lesson of the Old Testament – that these *all died in faith and never knew salvation*. We leave our people in ignorance of the gospel. They have a religion and a form of worship but no Saviour.

“Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent *the message of this salvation*” (Acts 13:26). As gospel missionaries we must know what our message is. Wherever we go, and whatever we do, *our aim is to help people put all their trust in Jesus Christ*.

We should never forget this. We are ambassadors, not for patriarchs, prophets, priests or kings: “We are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20). He is the only one who can “save to the uttermost” (Heb 7:25). So then... “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (Heb 2:3).