

THE DOCTRINES OF THE BIBLE: SOTERIOLOGY



THE PURPOSE, PLAN AND METHOD OF GOD

Soteriology (Thiessen, 1949) is the Biblical doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ and God's plan for the salvation of mankind through His Son. This includes the entire scope of Jesus Christ, from His pre-incarnate state (before being born as a human being), His short life on Earth, through His ascension to heaven and His ultimate return.

This document follows the format of Thiessen's original work, but shortened, and includes additional comments.

TERMINOLOGY USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

There are terms that will be used in this document and they need to be understood. These refer to the character of God. Note that "omni" means "all" (Frame, 2020):

- non-moral attributes
 - omnipresence – God is present everywhere at the same time
 - omniscience – God knows everything
 - omnipotence – God is almighty
 - immutability – God is unchanging
- moral attributes
 - holiness – God is absolutely holy
 - righteousness – God is absolutely righteous
 - sovereignty – God has sovereignty over all of creation
 - goodness – God's goodness is undeniable
 - truth – God is truth

THE FALL OF MAN

As a result of man's fall, God has made a better way, by sending His Son to be the sacrificial Lamb to die in our place, and so reconcile man with God. Does this mean that God did not know that man would sin and fall? Indeed not. As a result of His omniscience, He knows everything past, present and future in advance.

Soteriology will not be a complete doctrine without focusing on the work of the Holy Spirit. As He promised, the Holy Spirit convinces man of his fallen state:

⁷Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.
⁸And when he is come, he will reprove the world of **sin**, and of **righteousness**, and of **judgment**:
⁹Of sin, because they believe not on me; ¹⁰Of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more; ¹¹Of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged. – **John 16:7-11**

The task of the Holy Spirit is to convince the world of:

- **sin** (unless man can be convinced of his sinful state and the results thereof, he will see no need to turn away from it);
- **righteousness** (the righteousness that only Jesus Christ can bring); and
- **judgement** (the end result of sin). It is only the Holy Spirit that can convict a sinner of his fallen state, paving the way to him understanding and accepting the salvation Jesus Christ offers. Once the sinner has been saved, the Holy Spirit is the One who deals with our conversion, justification and sanctification.

Conversion, justification and sanctification are three separate topics to be discussed as part of this ongoing series of Bible study topics.

GOD'S PURPOSE

We often completely misjudge the omniscience of God – that He knows everything. He has all knowledge, and nothing is hidden from His sight. Thus, He knew from the start, even when forming Adam to be the perfect example of creation, that he would sin and lose the perfection with which he was created. God planned a long time before Adam was created and before you and I were born, to offer salvation for us as a result of the fall.

⁴According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ⁵Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, – **Ephesians 1:4-5**

Of course, critics are quick to jump to this verse to claim that God is unfair and that from before the foundation of the world, He has already decided who to save and who to condemn. God did not choose to save some and allow others to be condemned, but He knew in His wisdom who would respond to the call of salvation and who would reject it. The Bible clearly teaches that it is God's desire that all must be saved:

⁹The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. – **2 Peter 3:9**

Ultimately, sinful man has been given a will, and with this will God does not interfere. I once heard a preacher say this during a sermon: "If you knew the power of your will, you would give it back to God" (Unknown). Our own will is often what gets us into trouble beyond imagination. God's perfect will for all of mankind is that they will be saved. His permissive will is that some will not be saved, but through their own choice (will) they perish.

God's plan for man is that he will come to salvation. Although man sinned and lost his holy standing before God, this does not mean that man does not have any knowledge of God. We all are aware of our sin and are aware of the existence of God, although many will deny it. Even a non-believer does believe in the existence of God when he says that he does not believe in the existence of God! There is no way to take an omnipresent God out of the picture.

As we have seen the purpose of God in man, we also see it in Scripture, namely in the law and the prophets. The law is not what saved us, but what led us towards Jesus Christ:

²⁴Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. – **Galatians 3:24**

In the same way, the prophets and others in the Old Testament all pointed towards the coming Messiah. There are many examples, but for me this one has always stood out:

¹⁸They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. – **Psalm 22:18**

The account of the crucifixion is very clear and states these two events happening exactly the way it was prophesied. Matthew notes the two events and then quotes Psalm 22 to confirm the prophecy:

And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots. – **Matthew 27:34-35**

God has a very definite plan for our salvation. “This plan includes the means by which salvation is to be provided, the objectives that are to be realized, the persons that are to benefit by it, the conditions on which it is to be available, and the agents and means by which it is to be applied.” Excerpt From: Henry C. Thiessen. “Lectures in Systematic Theology”. Apple Books.

Using this information we see that the means is Jesus Christ; the objectives are the reasons; the persons are those who respond to the gospel; the conditions are the methods by which it is given to man; and the agents and means include the working of the Holy Spirit. Note though, that there is only one plan that is the same for everybody. If we want to understand God’s plan for man’s salvation, then we need to study the entire Bible as the complete Word of God. From the very start of the recorded history of the Bible, we see God’s plan for man’s salvation in action. The purpose was to save us from the consequences of sin, including the guilt, power, presence and penalty of sin. Not only are we saved through the plan God has made but ultimately nature will be freed from the curse of sin. We merely have to look at prophetic scriptures such as Isaiah to see this:

¹⁷For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind. – **Isaiah 65:17**

Since creation was negatively affected by the curse of sin, it only makes sense that when the curse is removed, creation will be changed positively to its former glory.

GOD'S PLAN

God's plan for man starts with man's repentance, which comes before salvation through faith. Man must first understand his precarious position. Repentance is the act of admitting your sin. After this, salvation comes to the individual when he accepts God's gift in faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God:

⁶But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. –

Hebrews 11:6

After salvation through faith, the regeneration of the soul takes place. This then also starts the process of sanctification, which continues until the day the believer dies or is raptured.

GOD'S METHOD

Through the ages, God has never changed, but the methods He has used to draw man closer to Him have. For each dispensation, there was a way to achieve the ultimate goal – to bring man back to God. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross is the final step to bring man to God through salvation. This is the dispensation of grace, or the Church age. In this dispensation man does not have to uphold the law of old by offering sacrifices. Jesus Christ was the final sacrifice, and this does not need to be repeated.

In the Old Testament, the first man and his wife were in an age of innocence. They had to stand a simple test of obedience, and failed. Suddenly, the innocent character was replaced with one of guilt and thus they died spiritually. Now their conscience kicked in but despite this, the first Adam and his successors could not manage to live righteously, and the result was the Flood. After the Flood, human government was introduced. This failed as well, and the result was the building of the tower of Babel. After this, God made a covenant with Abraham, and the successors of this promise were Isaac and Jacob. The dispensation ended with Jacob's descendants in slavery in Egypt. After this the exodus followed, and the Law was introduced. Still God knew that his people needed a Saviour, who they killed. This ends the methods God used in the Old Testament. Does it mean that God was not in control? Indeed not, but throughout every successive period or dispensation, man proved that he was not able to get out of the trap of sin.

In the New Testament, God provided the Lamb, and all those who accept Him have the opportunity to be reconciled to God. It is important to note that Jesus Christ made atonement not only for New Testament saints, but also for those of the Old Testament:

²¹But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; ²²Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: ²³For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; ²⁴Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: ²⁵Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; ²⁶To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. – **Romans 3:21-26**

In this dispensation every person has equal access to salvation, irrespective of their background. What is required is the acceptance of the provision God the Father has made through His Son. The process of being born again requires repentance, acceptance in faith, regeneration, justification and then a continued period of growth. Of course, this still does not mean that everyone will accept the invitation. It is clear that as we speed towards the end of this age, man's wickedness is as bad as before. However, the opportunity for salvation is given, and man is free to decide how he is going to respond to it.

The final dispensation, which is still to come, the millennial kingdom, is one where the nation of Israel will have their king, while the redeemed of all ages will live forever. During the period of 1000 years, there will still be people born and not all of them will accept the offer of salvation. Yet the proof of God's salvation will be clearer than ever before. After all, those born in the millennium will be able to see the King of Israel reigning in Jerusalem. Unlike those in the church age who were still looking forward to the hope:

¹Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. –
Hebrews 11:1

those in the Millennium will already have seen the risen Jesus reign as King. For them, faith in what they have not yet seen is not the requirement we in the Church age have had to meet.

THE PREINCARNATE STATE OF JESUS CHRIST

The wonder of the gospel is that Jesus Christ was human and divine at the same time. This was necessary so that He could reconcile man to God. Throughout the ages there has been a lot of debate about the incarnate Jesus. Who was He? What position did He hold in heaven? What about the many references in the Old Testament where He is attributed to? John tells us that He was in the beginning.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
²The same was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life; and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. –
John 1:1-5

We learn here that He was there in the beginning and already then, He had the title of the Word. Not only was the Word with God, He was God Himself. When was the beginning? It was before the creation of the world. He made all things. John emphasises this by using both a positive and negative statement. All things were made by Him, and nothing was made where He was not present. Paul gives the same information in Colossians 1:15:

¹⁵Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: ¹⁶For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: ¹⁷And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence. –
Colossians 1:16-18

Note how Paul uses the present indefinite tense in verse 17: and He **is** before all things. This is the same tense Jesus uses of Himself:

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I **am**. –
John 8:58

He is past, present, and future. Even more, as the omnipresent God, He transcends time itself. He was before the past and will still be after the future.

As the second person in the trinity, He is often referred to as Son and Jehovah, but never as Christ. He appears as the angel of the Lord. Evidence is found in Genesis 6:7-14; Genesis 22:11-18; Genesis 31:11-13, and Exodus 3:2-5. There are many other examples, but it is clear that He existed in a very personal and physical manner.

THE HUMILIATION OF CHRIST

Jesus Christ left the domain of heaven and assumed the form of a man. As John puts it, the Word became flesh. He thus left heaven and took on the nature of man, but without sin. Paul describes this in his letter to the church in Philippi:

⁶Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: ⁷But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: ⁸And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. ⁹Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name:
– **Philippians 2:6-9**

Why was it necessary to come to the Earth in the form of a man? There are many reasons for this. First, it was necessary to confirm God's promises. The first one we read of in Genesis 3:15 where, after the fall of man, God speaks to the serpent:

¹⁵And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. – **Genesis 3:15**

1. Jesus came to the Earth in the form of a man to **reconcile us to Him** through His promises.

And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: – **Ephesians 2:16**

2. Jesus came **to reveal God the Father to us**. Again, John explains this to us:

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. – **John 1:18**

3. He came **to be a high priest**. No New Testament book describes the role of the priest as well as the writer to the Hebrews. In the Old Testament priests were taken from ordinary men so that they could represent man before God. In the same way it was necessary that Jesus became a man so that He could be from men:

¹For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: ²Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. ³And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. ⁴And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. – **Hebrews 5:1-4**

4. He came **to put away sin**. By sacrificing Himself (Hebrews 9:26), He became the perfect offer that would please God the Father:

⁴⁵For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. – **Mark 10:45**

This means that He redeemed us from our sins through His death and the shedding of blood on the cross. Without the blood, there is no atonement. Just as in the Old Testament a goat had to be sent into the wilderness while another was sacrificed, Jesus became the sacrificial lamb (John 1:29). It is best described in the Old Testament by Isaiah:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. – **Isaiah 53:6**

In the New Testament Paul describes it this way:

²¹For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. – **2 Corinthians 5:21**

God the Father allowed His Son, who did not sin at all, to become sin for us so that we could be made righteous.

5. He came **to destroy the works of the devil**. John describes it this way:

For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. – **1 John 3:8b**

6. He came **to show us how to live a holy life**. In all of His interactions with people, He showed how a holy life must be lived. Matthew describes Him as having a gentle heart (Matthew 11:29); and John says we have to walk (live) the same way as He did (1 John 2:6).
7. He came **to prepare for his coming** in future. He is about to return for His bride, the Church.

¹⁶For 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: ¹⁷Then 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. ¹⁸Wherefore comfort one another with these words. – **1 Thessalonians 4:16-18**

After seven years He will return to defeat the enemies of Israel and reign as King.

¹¹And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. – **Revelation 19:11**

CONCLUSION

We have seen in this Bible study God's purpose and plan for man through His Son. As a result of the fall of man, it was impossible that man could be reconciled to God. Man lost the incorruptible nature he had in the garden of Eden. In bit the Old Testament and the New Testament God revealed how the reconciliation was going to work. We saw how it worked in the past; how it works now in the present; and how it will unfold in the future.

Jesus came to the Earth in human form to:

- confirm God's promises
- reveal the Father to us
- become a high priest
- put away sin
- destroy the works of the devil
- prepare for His second coming

In the next part of this ongoing study of Soteriology, we will look at the nature of the incarnation and His two natures – perfect God yet perfect man.

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