

In my last article I sought to point that our great salvation was sovereignly planned by God in eternity, then pictured and prophesied throughout the Old Testament. The apostle Peter, looking back over the Scriptures, was inspired to write: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets ... predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.” (1 Peter 1:10,11). Now I want to consider how all this came about, which was through:

### A DETERMINED TIME AND PLACE

We read that “*when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son*” (Gal 4:4) – “*fullness*” being when the time came that the full unfolding of God’s will from Creation, through the call of Abraham, the building of the nation of Israel, the choice of the tribe of Judah, the family line of King David, the return of the exiles from Babylon and right up to the days of a young woman named Mary living in Nazareth, was then complete. It was in the days when “*a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.*” (Luke 2:1,2) Through all those centuries, God was sovereignly preparing for the time when His Son would be born into the world; and so it came about that “*salvation is from the Jews.*” (John 4:22)

God not only determined the time of his Son’s incarnation, but also the place: “*Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.*” (Micah 5:2) So it was that “*Joseph went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.*” Then we read, “*And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.*” (Luke 2:4–6)

It has often been pointed out that the incarnation occurred during the period of the Roman Empire, when there were good roads and, for the time, excellent communications. Society was very multi-cultural with the languages of Latin, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic being widely used and understood. Consequently, almost immediately, from the Day of Pentecost, the apostles and many other believers were able to travel and spread the gospel in what we now call Asia and Europe; there is even some evidence that, before the end of the first century, the good news of the Saviour had reached as far as India. So it was that Paul could note that the gospel had come to “*the whole world*” (Col 1:5,6) – that is, the known world of his day.

This is all wonderfully clear a demonstration of how ‘God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year’. And He will continue to do so for the rest of time, in every place, and then for all eternity. Through the ages God has been bringing His great and eternal plans to fruition through all the comings and goings of world powers, political and religious movements, and even wars and pandemics here on the earth. “*I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’*” (Isaiah 46:9,10)

As we read the Old Testament, we see how God worked through the rise and fall of great empires. He worked through the Pharaohs of Egypt to build the nation of Israel and liberate them at the Exodus. He subdued nations on the Israelites’ wilderness journey and as they settled in the Promised Land. He also punished His idolatrous people by the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions. Then, as just pointed out, God sent His Son into the world in the days of the Roman Empire – just the right context for accomplishing His great work of salvation and spreading, both rapidly and far and wide, the wonderful news of the gospel.

Not only does God work through all the upheavals of nations, but also in the troubles the Church has experienced over the centuries, and still in the ups and downs of our own lives. So Job was able to say of His sovereign God, “*I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.*” (Job 42:2) Do you have that same confidence in God?

### THROUGH THE CHOICE OF PARTICULAR PEOPLE

The events of Advent are replete with characters. Firstly we meet Zechariah, a priest serving in the temple in Jerusalem and married to Elizabeth. He received a great shock when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and promised the birth of a son, in spite of the couple’s advanced years. Then Gabriel visited the virgin Mary and foretold the birth of the Messiah through her. Some weeks later, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to reassure him concerning his fiancée’s pregnancy. The next people to be involved were a group of shepherds on night duty, astounded by the visitation of a heavenly host. Then the baby was recognised in the temple – by Simeon, as the long promised Saviour; and by Anna, as the Redeemer of Israel.

With the exception of Caesar (who ordered the census), Quirinius (the governor), Herod (the king in Judea) and the Magi, all the rest of those God sovereignly chose to be involved in the coming of His Son into the world were either elderly or would have been considered as very ordinary by the rest of the population. God occasionally works through important national or international figures; by and large, however, He works His purposes out through very ordinary people: “*consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the*

*strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are”* (1 Cor 1:26–28). If such people did not amount to much in the world’s eyes, they were very particular and precious to God.

I wonder if Satan sometimes tempts you to see yourself as rather worthless? In reality, the very opposite is true if you belong to the Lord. Bear in mind the fact that, if you are one of God’s redeemed people, He is changing the world and completing His eternal purposes through *you!* It may well be in small ways, but it is never in insignificant ways. Your involvement in God’s great sovereign plan is having eternal consequences. You matter to God’s eternal scheme of things, so don’t let anyone or anything persuade you otherwise.

### **THROUGH THE LORD’S EARTHLY LIFE**

Our Lord’s incarnation was just as much a vital part of God’s great salvation plan as any other event. We are told that God’s Son “*had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*” (Heb 2:17) In order to become the “*one mediator between God and men*”, God’s beloved Son had to become “*the man, Christ Jesus*” (1 Timothy 2:5).

Sometimes in our evangelical circles, there is the danger in our thinking and preaching of going straight from the cradle to the cross. Unless we deliberately spend time considering the historical material in the four gospels, we can easily overlook the accounts and great significance of the details of our Lord’s early life and earthly ministry. When in the Nazareth synagogue, at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus read this from the scroll: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.*” (Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isaiah 61:1–2) Notice that, as far as Jesus was concerned, His proclaiming the gospel and performing miracles were of equal value in the great saving work He came to do.

Not only was Jesus’s earthly life and service of vital importance, it also had tremendous impact. People “*were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority*” (Mark 1:22). His popularity spread far and wide, for “*the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed*” (Luke 5:15). As Peter asserted in his Pentecost Day message, Jesus was “*a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst*” (Acts 2:22). He was enabled to do such mighty miracles because “*God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.*” (Acts 10:38)

The verse just quoted reminds us that Jesus had authority over evil and the devil, which was demonstrated as He “*cast out many demons and would not permit them to speak*” (Mark 1:34). An essential part of our Lord’s earthly ministry was exercising power over evil and the devil; indeed, “*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil*” (1 John 3:8). This, too, was part of God’s great plan of “*such a great salvation*” (Hebrews 2:3).

Another essential element was the integrity of our Lord’s earthly life. He was able to issue the challenge to those following Him, “*Which one of you convicts me of sin?*” (John 8:46) Not surprisingly, there was no response! At the end of His earthly life, when suffering that travesty of a sham of a trial, the only witnesses that could be found against Jesus were bogus ones: “*For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree.*” (Mark 14:56) While being questioned by Pilate, “*sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much because of him today in a dream.’*” (Matt 27:19) Clearly Pilate’s wife was fully persuaded of Jesus’s innocence and very fearful of the consequences for her husband should he unjustly condemn Him. Pilate himself actually came to conclude that Jesus was guiltless and said as much to the crowd: “*Behold, I am bringing Him out to you so that you may know that I find no guilt in Him.*” (John 19:4) Finally, the Roman soldier in charge of the crucifixion of Jesus, and the two criminals with Him, “*praised God, saying, ‘Certainly this man was innocent!’*” (Luke 23:47)

All these remarkable aspects of our Lord’s life and ministry on earth are summed up in what the apostle Paul was inspired to write to Timothy: “*He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*” (1 Timothy 3:16) They all formed vitally important and essential parts of God’s plan for our great salvation.

I think that, from time to time, most Christians are tempted to doubt their salvation. Some even go through prolonged periods of such doubt, and maybe that is where you are right now. In such times, it is well worthwhile stopping to ask the question, “*Why did Jesus come into this world and spend His whole earthly life serving His Father?*” He gave us the answer Himself, immediately after explaining to the Samaritan woman at the well His great gift of the water of eternal life. “*My food is to do will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.*” (John 4:34). Jesus was here telling His disciples that completing His Father’s purpose in winning souls was far more important to Him than His daily food.

That purpose was “*to seek and to save the lost.*” (Luke 19:10) If you are feeling lost in doubt, look afresh to the living Lord Jesus Christ, who deliberately came into the world and dedicated Himself to saving you as much as anybody else! His heart beats with a passion for saving people – “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” (Matt 9:36) – so why would He treat you any differently? You can be assured fully that the Lord Jesus was born on earth, lived, died, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven so that through Him the “*forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you*” (Acts 13:38).

If you have never trusted in the Lord Jesus, what good reason can you give for not doing so even now? Don’t put off turning to Him, admitting your need of is forgiveness and receiving Him as your Saviour.

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