

Story of the New Testament

A Biblical Theology of the New Testament

The Church's Birth

Jesus doesn't simply save people from their sins, He saves them into a community called the Church. The Church is the primary means by which He is taking His gospel message into the world.

OUTLINE OF BIBLICAL HISTORY, ACTS

After Jesus had ascended, his disciples waited in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began the task of proclaiming Jesus. As the missionary implications of the gospel became clearer to the first Christians, the local proclamation was extended to world evangelization. The apostle Paul took the gospel to Asia Minor and Greece, Establishing many Churches as he went. eventually a Church flourished at the heart of the empire at Rome.¹

Big Picture Storyline

Both the *birth* and *growth* are aspects of God's kingdom expanding throughout the earth. Luke's task in writing the book of Acts, the second part of his Historical biography of Jesus Christ, is to deal with "all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (v.1). Jesus' words and works. Luke then records that Jesus appeared to them and was ...

speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3)

Eventually, His disciples ask him,

"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

The question that the disciples ask the Lord Jesus is the pressing question that guides the book of Acts. It is the governing question that frames all of Luke's two part story. *Will the kingdom now be restored?*

Jesus responds that they will receive power in the Spirit of God and they will witness, or bear His image, "**in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth**" (v.8).

Jesus died on the cross, so the king has been lifted upon His throne. And yet His lordship is such that He conquered death with death, and was powerfully resurrected from the dead.

Now His mission is to promulgate His kingdom throughout the earth.

Vaughan Roberts defines God's Kingdom as "God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing."² This is a good definition, but I'd like to change it a bit. I'll define God's kingdom as

God's presence with God's people in God's place

My definition assumes God's reign and rule because it's talking about *kingdom*.

So the next section of our discussion will include the explosion and expansion of God's Kingdom on earth.

¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 210.

² Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*, 31.

Storylines

All good Biblical Theology starts in Genesis 1-2. For here is the first bookend of the story. Genesis 1-2 is life *par excellence*. In Genesis 1-2, we get the perfect picture of God with His people in His place. God is obviously there. God's people, Adam and Eve, were there. And the garden is the playground of life for God and His people to dwell and eat and drink and work etc. Everything was the way it was meant to be. Everything was the way it was supposed to be.

In Genesis 3, sin ruins everything. God exiles Adam and Eve ending God's presence with His people as well as their residence in God's place. The kingdom is fractured. Relationship is severed. Sin begins its work in the world.

Then we get to Genesis 11.

Gen. 11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.
(Gen 11:1-9)

The people of the earth decided to *build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens*, in order to *make a name for themselves*. Even after the great Flood, sin veiled as ambition or achievement led to prideful endeavors to build up the hearts of man instead of thank the Creator.

God saw that their hearts were growing in pride. He could see that their rebellious desire to usurp the throne of the King was growing yet again and they sought to do so by building a city and a tower or temple.

So God confused their speech and dispersed them throughout the ends of the earth.

In Genesis 12, God came to Abraham and called him away from his kindred and land.

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
(Gen 12:1-3)

So after spreading mankind throughout the earth and giving them different languages, God purposed to call together a people for Himself.

God is beginning to rebuild a people and He told Abraham to leave his homeland and come to a *place* that God will show him. God's rescue mission includes people and place yet again.

After Joseph's unique life in Gen 37-50, God's people increase in the land of Egypt.

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. 24 And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. 25 God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.

(Ex 2:23-25)

A change in executive leadership in Egypt occurs and God's people become slaves (Exodus 2). They cry out to their God and He hears their plea. In a burning bush, God speaks to Moses, the intermediary between God and His people saying,

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

(Ex 3:7-8)

God hears their cries and uses Moses to deliver His people from Pharaoh, out of Egypt and into a new land. He's going to deliver them into a good land. A place of abundance. God promised Abraham that this same land would be where God's people would eventually flourish and be with their Creator.

In Exodus 12-13, God delivers His people through the Passover and Exodus event. As God's people are heading toward the land of Promise, God meets with them on a mountain top.

In Exodus 20, God reminds them of their salvation and then delivers the law. The law is a guide for kingdom living. It is the relational stipulations between the covenant parties, God and Israel. Now just before giving them the law, God tells them...

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel."

(Ex 19:5-6)

God says to His people that they are His and He theirs, and they are to be a kingdom of priests, vice-regents in His kingdom mission. They are ambassadors who speak and act on behalf of the King. So God's people are kingdom people, subjects submitted to the reign and rule of the king, and through them, God's reign will cover the earth.

After wandering around in the desert a while longer, God's people come to edge of the Promised Land in Numbers 13-14. God tells Israel to send spies into see whether the land was good and what its inhabitants were like. Twelve spies enter. Twelve spies return with a mixed report.

God tells the people that He will be with them, that He will deliver this place into their hands and they turn away. They rebel. They get a picture of *the good life* and fear the fight to make it theirs *even though* God promised it to them and said He will give it to them.

So God judges them and says they won't enter for 40 years. Forty years of wandering in the desert. The entire adult generation will die before anyone enters the Land of Promise.

So they wander around.

Deuteronomy was written at the end of their 40 years, just before Moses was to die and they were to enter the land of Promise.

In Joshua, God takes His people into His place.

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), 16 the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. 17 Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. (Josh 3:14-17)

This scene is reminiscent of God's deliverance of His people from a marauding Egyptian army. God is bringing His people into His place. Remember, this is the place where Abraham was told by God that He would build His people.

God had promised this place to His people and the means by which they will get this is through a relationship, or covenant, built on a sacrifice.

After Joshua, God's people increase in that land.

In 1 Samuel, God anoints His King, King David, to represent God to His people. David hands off the building plans for a Temple to His Son. Solomon builds a Temple for the Lord to dwell in. So God's presence represented in the Temple is now in His place, Jerusalem, with His people Israel.

But in 1 Kings 12, the Kingdom of Israel divides and God's kingdom is shattered yet again.

Eventually God will send His people into exile. God exiles His people in both the North and South. The North (Samaria or Israel) was exiled in 722 BC as found in 2 Kings 17. And the South (Judah) was exiled between 605 and 596BC as found in 2 Kings 25. Second Kings 17 offers commentary.

Note the exact same features that we saw in Genesis 3, God's people rebel and they are exiled from the place of God and the presence of God. Because of their sin and rebellion, because of their disobedience to God's Word, they were removed from His holy presence.

Things didn't get much better through the prophets. The people are removed from God's place because their allegiance to God fails.

Fast forward to the days of Isaiah, a prophet of Judah. Prophesying to God's people in the Southern Kingdom. He calls Judah to repent, for their sin has created a wedge between them and God. Their judgment is imminent. And God forewarns of judgment for Assyria and anyone who is wicked as well (Isaiah 1-10). But then God says, through Isaiah that a remnant will be restored to relationship with God (Isaiah 10:20-34).

In the context of this restoration is a person. A promised person.

A righteous branch from the stump of Jesse, the Father of the King, will be raised up. And this righteous branch will be uniquely endowed with the Spirit of God. And He will gather a people to Himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. In fact, He will gather a people from the enemies of God's people; Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, and Cush.

God's people will be brought together from the four corners of the world to dwell with Him.

God's people eventually get back to the land of promise after decades of exile. In Ezra and Nehemiah, they rebuild Jerusalem and its wall. But the presence of God doesn't appear to return to His people in the capacity that He once was.

God's people are longing to be with Him in His place.

Story

Matt. 28:16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
(Matt 28:16-20)

At the end of Matthew's gospel narrative, Jesus appears to His disciples and tells them to make disciples of all nations. He commissions them to take His kingdom into the world and make disciples or people of the king.

READ Acts 1-2

In Acts 1-2, God's presence and God's people and God's place converge. They converge through three primary shifts.

- 1) God's presence shifts from Jesus *with God's people* to the Holy Spirit *in God's people*.
- 2) God's people shift from ethnic Israel to Samaritans to Gentiles.
- 3) God's place shifts from Jerusalem and the Temple to the people and the ends of the earth.

In these two chapters and the chapters that follow, we will see the kingdom restored on earth for a watching world to behold.

God's presence shifts from Jesus with God's people to the Holy Spirit in God's people

In the gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, God's presence is bound up with Jesus. We talked about this in Jesus' birth especially. Jesus is called "Immanuel," or God with us (Isaiah 9). Jesus is baptized and upon His coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit of God rests upon His person and a voice from Heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Jesus is presented as God walking amongst His people, living with them, dwelling with them to the degree that He took on flesh.

In John, Jesus promised a time when He would have to leave His disciples *in order that* God's Holy Spirit might come to be with them.

John 15-16

This spirit will witness to Jesus' Word and work.

In Acts 1, all of this begins to happen.

The promise of the Holy Spirit is reiterated twice in the early verses of Acts. Then on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were together and the Holy Spirit came upon them and the text says,

*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.
(Acts 2:4)*

Peter preaches the first pentecostal sermon from the book of Joel (Joel 2). In that sermon, Peter recognizes that the people in Jerusalem for the feast are witnessing what Joel had prophesied hundreds of years prior. In preaching the gospel, he says,

Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Peter later preaches the gospel to Jewish authorities saying,

Acts 5:31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

The Spirit of God is used close to 60 times in the book of Acts. Dr. David Pao argues that the Holy Spirit is the main character of the book.

Eventually, the gospel goes to different groups of people and the sign that they have truly become believers is that the Holy Spirit falls on them. We'll see this in the next section.

God's People Shifts from Ethnic Israel to Samaritans to Gentiles

We saw earlier that God's people came to be known as Israel. Israel carried both ethnic and geographic distinctions. It was both a people and a place.

Jesus' disciples and followers, for the most part, were all from Israel. Starting in Acts 2 but moving to Acts 8 and 10, the gospel goes not just to ethnic Israel, God's covenant people, but to all nations and peoples.

In Acts 2, Peter's pentecostal sermon is primarily to Jews who had gathered for the Pentecost Festival. Jews come to know and understand who Jesus is. They respond to the gospel with repentance and faith and a community is formed (Acts 2:41-47). So the Holy Spirit came to work in the lives of Jews.

From the four corners they came. During the Pentecost celebration, people from all over the world came to worship and celebrate. People from all four corners of the world would have been present.

Babel reversed. Names are important in the book of Acts. Peoples names are all over. The word "name" is used 62 times in the book of Acts. Of those 62 occurrences, 33 refer to the name of the Lord Jesus. The name or word "Jesus" is used 71 times in the book.

In Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel, God scatters the people after making their languages scattered. Here, God gathers the people and speaks to all of them in one language. In Genesis 4, the people say, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4). In Acts 2, God brings his people from the four corners of the earth to worship and then He makes a name for them. He gives them a name.

In the following chapters, Peter and James and John are preaching the gospel to Jews in marketplaces and synagogues and wherever they can.

In Acts 7-8, a Christian man was killed for his faith in Jesus, scattering a now persecuted Church throughout the region.

*And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.
(Acts 8:1)*

In Acts 8, we see the gospel go to the Samaritans.

Eventually, one of Jesus' disciples, Phillip went down to Samaria. Samaria was full of *half breeds*. *They weren't Jews, but they weren't Gentiles*. They were a hold over from the divided kingdom in the time of the prophets and formed their own nation state and religious life based on Judaism up to the point of exile. After God's people returned from the exile, Samaria retained their national and religious distinction.

But the gospel, as seen here in Acts 8, goes to the Samaritans. The gospel goes to people who were historically Jewish, but weren't God's people at the time.

In Acts 10, Peter gets a vision where God tells him to eat of *unclean animals*. A Gentile, God-fearer asked Peter to come and share the gospel with him and his family and relatives.

The gospel goes to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit falls upon all who heard the word, confirming their faith and God's blessing of them. No longer will unholy or unclean things be outside of God's family of faith, but now the family of faith expands to the borders of the earth.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."
(Acts 1:8)*

The story of the Old Testament is one where the presence of god comes to dwell with a people in a place. From Roberts' definition above, *God's presence with God's People in God's Place*. In the Old Testament, this is exhibited eventually in The Temple with God's people Israel in the Promised Land (or Jerusalem).

In the New Testament, we see the Temple curtain split open (Matt. 27:51), the presence of God comes to dwell in God's people, but the boundaries for God's people are sent running to the ends of the earth. The promise in Isaiah 11 that all the nations, all of Israel's enemies will be grafted into the family of faith is now coming true. The Holy Spirit has come to rest upon people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

When Jesus is first born in part one of Luke's historical biography, an angel of the Lord tells a group of lowly shepherds that the gospel is...

good news of great joy that will be for all the people (Luke 2:10).

God's people are no longer ethnic Jews, but Samaritans and Gentiles alike.

God's Place Shifts from Jerusalem to People at the Ends of the Earth

In the Old Testament and even Jesus' day, the place where God was known to dwell and be with His people was in the Promised Land and more specifically in Jerusalem at the Temple. At this point in Acts, all the people who have experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit have been in the Jerusalem or the surrounding area.

At this point, the Church, even with Gentiles, was still located within the context of Palestine, for the most part. But after this, the Church explodes throughout the Mediterranean.

But what occurs in the next section of the book of Acts is that the gospel, through the people God has saved and endowed with His Holy Spirit, will go to the ends of the earth.

Remember that verse in the first chapter? God's people will bear witness, they will bear His image,

"in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (v.8).

And this will take us to our next major story, the growth of the Church.

But before we go there, what does this mean for us?

Our Story

You have the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is in you, guiding you, working to convict you of sin and point you to Jesus.

*Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,
(1 Cor 6:19)*

He is not just working in super holy people or charismatic people. He doesn't just work in the lives of "prayer warriors" or elders of the Church. No. He is working in all who trust in Jesus for salvation. This is good news.

You are part of God's Holy People. The story of God's people in the Old and New Testaments isn't some abstract fable or distant history, it is our history. They are us. We are them. Their story is our story and we have much to learn from those who go before us.

You are part of God's plan for promulgating His good news. You are the primary means by which God is taking His gospel into the world. He has no plan B. You are plan A. The Church or God's people are the means by which the gospel moves through the world and comes to bear upon the lives and hearts of people.