

## SUMMARY OF MISSIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Missions is not just something the church does, nor is it an afterthought in God's planning. It is as some have said, "The theme of the Bible."<sup>1</sup> This missions theme is the unifying force of all sixty-six books in the Bible. God's plan, according to W.O. Carver, is revealed in Ephesians 3:6 where God makes known this "mystery" of the Old Testament. The gentiles or the nations have been a part of God's masterplan from the very beginning.

The apostle's understanding of this plan is seen in their early preaching of Old Testament texts. Peter stood at the day of Pentecost and said, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Joel 2:32). What the prophet Joel had said, Peter saw as a fulfillment in his day. Later in his ministry, Peter enters the house of a Gentile and preaches the good news. The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard after Peter proclaimed, "all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (Acts 10:43). The apostle Paul became the missionary to the Gentiles because of his understanding of the Old Testament. In one of his sermons in Pisidian Antioch, he quoted Isaiah 49:6 where it states, "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

How did Peter and Paul and the other apostles come to understand the mission theme of the Bible? It was not easy for them to learn this. In fact, Luke 18:31-34 says, "they

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<sup>1</sup>H. Cornell Goerner, *All Nations in God's Purpose*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 11.

understood none of these things." H. Cornell Goerner points out that after Peter's great confession recorded in Matthew 16, that Jesus began to show them from the scriptures everything concerning his death and the father's plan. Jesus also instructed James, John, and Peter after the transfiguration on the mountain. These teaching sessions were expositions from the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of these pre-crucifixion sessions with Jesus, the apostles "just didn't get it" until after the resurrection. Therefore, it must be assumed that Jesus spent many hours with his disciples after the resurrection doing what he did with the two on the road to Emmaus. In fact, these few verses in Luke 24 give the church the biblical foundation for her mission enterprise. In the book *All Nations in God's Purpose*, Goerner splendidly narrates the Luke 24 account. The climax of this story and the outline of this paper is as follows: "He said to them, this is what I told you while I was still with you. Every thing must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, this is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:44-46). "Jesus had found his father's plan for world redemption revealed throughout the Hebrew Bible. In all three sections, the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms, he found it written, that on the basis of his death and resurrection, repentance for the forgiveness of sin was to be proclaimed to all the nations, Gentile as well as Jews."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, these three sections will be used as the outline for this paper in order to bring to light from the entire Old Testament this all nations theme.

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 19-20.

### **God's Plan for All Peoples in the Books of Moses**

Genesis is the book of beginnings, so it is fitting that a discussion of God's plan for the nations should begin there. The first eleven chapters of Genesis lay the foundation for everything that concerns itself with missions. Chapter one begins with God, is filled with God, and ends with God. Thirty-eight times the word "God" is used. He is the only true God and there are no other gods. He is the creator of all the earth and must be made known to all the nations. This chapter reveals God as the only God of creation and man being the ultimate focus of his love. Roger Hedlund says, "Creation is the work of God which culminates in man. The first concern of the Bible is not with Hebrews, but with humanity. Because of creation, there is but one human race. We all share the same common origin."<sup>4</sup>

In the Garden of Eden, God's plan for mankind is revealed. God desires a personal relationship with all, and eternal and abundant life is given freely for man to enjoy. Chapter three speaks of the universal problem of sin and its consequences. In verse 15 of this same chapter, the first promise is given concerning "the purpose of God to unite the human race to himself through one of its own members."<sup>5</sup> God also introduced the method of salvation by providing a substitute payment for sin. Genesis 4, through the story of Able teaches the church that, "we are our brother's keeper." Throughout these first chapters, God dealt with mankind as a whole and then in Geneses 11, God confused their language, scattered the "nation," and set in motion his plan of bringing the "nations" back into a covenant relationship with himself.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup>Julian Price Love, *The Missionary Message of the Bible*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1941), 17.

God's plan was that through one nation, all the nations of the world would be blessed. God chose Abram out of idolatry and said, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on the earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:1-3). Some have questioned why God would only choose one nation out of so many. Julian Love answers this saying, "The choice of one race among many was not an anti-missions act on God's part, selecting one and letting others go by; it was rather among the most missionary of his acts, choosing one and filling it with a sense of his will and a deep understanding of his nature so that it might teach all mankind."<sup>6</sup> Avery Willis also states, "God chose the Israelites, not because he liked them better, but in order that they might bring the lost to a knowledge of God. God elects and in this election enters into the missionary enterprise. This understanding takes one back to the premise that God is author and originator of missions."<sup>7</sup>

The other books of Moses continue this "all nations" theme. Genesis focuses on God's promise to Abraham, where He repeated the Gen 12:1-3 promise many times to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 18:17-19; Gen 22:16-8; Gen 26:2-5; Gen 28: 13-15). In Exodus 19:3-6, before God gave the Ten Commandments, he set before the people a conditional covenant. He wanted them to be a kingdom of priests among all the nations. Goerner explains that, " The function of the priest is well known. He serves as a mediator between God and the congregation he serves. He makes the will of God known to the people and makes the people acceptable to God. However, in this case, it is not of one congregation, but of many priests serving among all the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>7</sup>Avery Willis, *the Biblical Basis of Missions*. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1979), 33.

nations of the earth."<sup>8</sup> Leviticus points to God's concern and ownership for the Gentiles (Lev 19:18, 34). In Numbers, God kept his oath and preserved a remnant that would spread his glory throughout the whole earth (Numbers 14: 20-23). Finally, Deuteronomy records Moses' last words at the end of the wilderness wanderings where he reaffirms God's ownership of all of the nations (Deut 10: 14-19).

### **God's Plan for All Peoples In The Writings of the Prophets**

Of all the declarations of worldwide mission, Isaiah is central among all the prophets. The fifty-third chapter speaks of the suffering servant, but Isaiah 52 and 54 point to the nations as the object of the love of this Suffering One. Goerner explains that before chapter divisions in the Bible, this whole section of the Old Testament from Chapter forty-one to sixty-six would have been treated as a whole. Jesus and the New Testament writers give ample evidence that they were familiar with and understood these Scriptures applied to the Messiah and to the nations.<sup>9</sup>

Jeremiah was "appointed as a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). He saw the future glory of a new covenant (Jer 31:33-34) which spoke of the Holy Spirit and Jeremiah knew that the ultimate purpose of God was "the nations" (Jer 16:19-21). Ezekiel's concern was the glory of God among the nations (Ezekiel 36:22-23; 38:23; 39:7). Israel would be brought back from captivity so that the great name of the Lord would no longer be profaned among the nations. Hosea foretold that the Gentiles would become the people of God (Hosea 1:10,23; Rom 9:25,26).

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<sup>8</sup>Goerner, *All Nations in God's Purpose*, 33.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 43-44.

After Paul's first missionary journey, the leaders in Jerusalem raised many questions concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church. James, at that critical point in church history, reached back to the book of Amos to bring resolution to a potentially damaging situation. He may have remembered Jesus' teaching from the Law, Prophets, and Psalms. Maybe it was just the Holy Spirit who gave him special insight on that day. Whatever the reason, James understood clearly that the gospel was meant not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. "He quoted Amos 9:11-12 from the Greek Septuagint."<sup>10</sup>

Joel gave to the church the "whosoever will gospel" that was quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost and expounded by Paul in his letter to the Romans. Micah prophesied the birthplace of the one "whose origins are from of old" (Micah 5:2). This kingdom rule was not only for the Jews, but would reach "to the ends of the earth" (Micah 5:5). Habakkuk called for universal worship through faith alone (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:7; Gal 3:11). The book of Zechariah is filled with intimate details of the Savior's final days and hours upon the earth. His entry into Jerusalem as the king and his method of death are outlined in this magnificent document.

The message of this prophet and the other prophets was unmistakably clear. "Yahweh, the eternal One is the God of all the nations. All will be judged with righteousness and justice."<sup>11</sup> The need for salvation and the call for repentance and the offer of forgiveness are universal. The Messiah must suffer for all, and after his resurrection this message would be proclaimed to the whole earth beginning in Jerusalem.

**God's plan for all nations in the Psalms.** The book of Psalms was probably the most

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 56.

familiar among the Hebrew people, because of its constant use in worship in the temple and the synagogues. These hymns of praise were chanted, sung, and prayed individually and corporately. The universal message woven throughout this collection of songs could not have been overlooked as it is today. Goerner explains that in many verses, the King James Version of the Bible has veiled the "all nations" theme. In Psalm 47:1, for example, the King James Version reads: "O clap your hands all ye people." This could be thought of as a call to all the people of Israel to come together to worship. Today's church often interprets and uses this verse in the context of a call to worship. However, the correct translation of this verse is: "Clap your hands all peoples," or as the New International Version of the Bible states: "Clap your hands all you nations." This verse is obviously addressed to all the nations, calling upon them to respond the God of all creation in worship. No doubt, every time this was sung, God reminded his covenant people of the offer of salvation to all nations and to the responsibility given to the Jews to be a kingdom of priests.

If one were to survey the book of Psalms searching for this missionary or "all nations" theme, Psalm 2:8 would be a beginning point. God says to his people, "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." In fact, if a careful study is conducted of Psalm 2, its missionary thrust is clearly seen. Roger E. Hedlund, in his book *The Mission of the Church in the World* offers a helpful outline. In Psalm 2:1-3, mankind rebels against the Lord. However, God is sovereign (Ps 2:4-6), and is not subject to man's approval. His plan will prevail and "His King", the Christ will be installed and enthroned in Zion. Thirdly, God's mission to the nations is enunciated (Ps 2:7-9), and was clearly understood by first-century believers (Heb 1:5, Rev 2:27). Lastly, the nations are offered their only hope,

which is submission to the King.<sup>12</sup>

Psalm 22 is most fascinating because it not only begins with the words "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" but because it reads as an eyewitness account of the crucifixion of Jesus. It is not known whether Jesus quoted anymore of this Psalm from the cross, however it is a possibility that he recited this Psalm to himself while hanging on the cross, or at least taught these thirty-one verses to his disciples in his post-resurrection discourse. The majority of Psalm 22 portrays the anguish and horror of Christ' death, however, the song shifts in verse 27 to the nations. The peoples of the earth are the purpose of this death. "All the ends of the earth will remember" (Ps 22:27). "All the families of the nations will bow down" (Ps 22:27). The rich will come, along with the poor and "future generations will be told" (Ps 22:30) that, "the Lord has done it" (Ps 22:31).

Psalm 33 focuses on God's work among the nations. Psalm 66 is set in the context of the Passover and recounts the mighty acts of God in delivering the children of Israel from Egypt. It was an invitation to the nations to come and worship this God who acted in history.<sup>13</sup> Psalm 67 is a missionary psalm, which anticipates the conversion of the nations. Nine times in seven verses the Psalmist challenges the listener to lift up his eyes and look to the nations as the recipient of God's salvation. Psalm 68 is a celebration of the redemption of Israel with the result being the redemption also of the Gentiles. As Isaac Watts meditated on Psalm 72, he penned the word to his famous hymn, "Jesus Shall Reign."<sup>14</sup> These above mentioned Psalms and many more (Pss 87, 96, 98, 117, 145) give ample proof from this section of the Old Testament that

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<sup>12</sup>Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 83.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 85.

God is a missionary God, that the people of Israel were a missionary people, and that Jesus had plenty of material to teach his disciples on their first post-resurrection meeting.

Jesus walked down the road to Emmaus with two disciples and explained the gospel from the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms, and the Bible said that their hearts burned within them as he spoke. The disciples attended "witnessing 101" in an upper room with Jesus and He taught them everything they needed in order to be a witness. He did not teach them the *Romans Road, Continued Witness Training, Evangelism Explosion, F.A.I.T.H., or Witnessing Without Fear*. Jesus taught them the Old Testament, and their minds were opened. With their minds opened, their hearts on fire, and their lives full of the Holy Spirit, it is no wonder that they went out and preached the gospel to all the known nations of their time. Could it be that what is needed in order for the church to be a witness-minded church and a mission-minded church is to really understand the message of the Bible, which is, "all nations?"

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