

The Church in God's Eternal Plan (Part 1)

Selected scriptures

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Tonight we return to the issue of the church. We have already answered, in our study of the doctrine of the church, what the Bible says about the church, a number of crucial questions. We began with why is it important and we talked about the priority of the church to God. Then we asked what is it and we worked slowly through a definition of the church. And that is so important in today's world when the waters have been so muddied as to what a church really is.

Over the last couple of weeks we have asked how is it that we distinguish between a true church and a false one, and how do you distinguish between a weak true church and a strong healthy true church, as we looked at together last week. And tonight and next week I want to ask and answer two more very basic questions. When did the church begin? And how exactly does the church differ from Israel and from the kingdom of God? As we go along I hope to help you understand why that is even an important question to ask. It has huge ramifications in how you live your Christian life and how you use your Bible. We will get there in just a few minutes.

But, I want us to look, over these two weeks, at how it is that the church fits into God's great redemptive program. Where on the stage of the drama of redemption does the church fit? When did it begin and how long will it exist and what is its purpose in this great eternal plan of our God? And how does it relate to the other things the Bible says God is doing in the world? These are all important questions for us to ask and answer because they have to do with where we spend our time and our priorities, and it comes back ultimately to the church.

So let's begin by asking the basic question, when is it that the church began? Well, this is a huge historical debate. Let me just tell you that there are essentially five views. One view says the church began with Adam, with the very first man who ever expressed faith in the seed of the woman that would come. Others would say no, it really began with Abraham and with the covenant that was made with him. Still others would say no, the church began with Christ, and one writer even details four possible times during the ministry of Christ when the church may have begun: the call of the first disciples perhaps, or the confession of Peter in Matthew 16 when Jesus said He would build His church, the Last Supper to establish the new covenant, and then others would say no, it came about when the apostles joined together in united belief in the resurrected Christ, at that moment the church was born. A fourth position says it began with Pentecost. And yet a fifth position said no, the church began with Paul. This by the way, this last view, is what is called a hyper dispensationalist view. This view believes there was some other kind of church in place until Paul, but it was not the New Testament church of the epistles and the Church Age. So, where is it? Where did the church begin and in the end why does it matter?

Well, let's start with a look at the biblical data. Exactly what does the Bible say about when the church began? Now, there are some hints in a number of passages and I want us to look at them tonight. I want us to begin with Matthew 16, turn there with me. Jesus mentioned the church by name, the *ekklesia*, twice during His earthly ministry. Once in Matthew 18 when He mentions church discipline, "tell it to the church," He says. And the other time in Matthew 16 and I want us to look at it together tonight.

Now, you will notice in verse 13 we get some historical context for what is going to transpire, "when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi," on the far north end of that part of the world, "He was asking His disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'" What are you hearing people say about My nature, about who I really am? "And they said," verse 14, "Some say John the Baptist," which was a pretty silly answer in the fact that John the Baptist was baptizing in the Jordan, "others Elijah," in anticipation of the prophecy that ended the Old Testament, "still others Jeremiah, or one of the Prophets." And He said to them," then He asks the question more directly of them, "Who do you say," plural, He is asking all the apostles, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter, typically the spokesman for the group, speaks up to let it be known what they think. "Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"

Now, I want you to see here that Peter makes no reference to the humanity of Christ. He makes no reference to Jesus' earthly name. Instead, his reference is to two titles of Jesus Christ. One of them is "the Christ," which of course comes from that great Hebrew word, *Ha-Mashiach*, the Messiah, the anointed one, the one specially anointed by God to carry out the mission that is described in the middle part of the book of Isaiah. And "You are the Son of the Living God." This was a confession both of the fact that He was the promised one in Isaiah come as the servant of Yahweh to accomplish salvation and He was at the same time not only a man on a mission but He was God; He was the Son of God.

So, in these two words, in these two titles, Peter captures both who Jesus is and what He is here to accomplish. He is the Son of God and He is here to accomplish all that the Messiah was predicted to accomplish in His life and in His death. And Jesus said to him verse 17, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjonah," son of Jonah, "because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in Heaven." He says, listen, you did not come to this on your own, this was a revelation from God.

And then in verse 18 we come to the crux of this passage, "I also say to you that you are Peter," this word, as you have heard, is a Greek word which means a stone, "and upon this" and He changes the Greek word, the word for rock there in the second occurrence is for a large rock, a foundation rock, a bedrock, and He says, you are a stone, "and upon this bedrock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." Now, there is a lot of debate about

what this means. What is this rock? And there are essentially three views of that. What do we mean by the rock on which the church is built?

Well, let me mention before I show you these, remember that Jesus was probably speaking originally in Aramaic. In Aramaic there is only one word for rock and it is the name that Christ had already given Peter earlier in his ministry. You remember, He said, when He initially was introduced to Peter, He said, “you are Cephas,” you are a rock. That is the only word there is in Aramaic. As it is translated here the words are changed, and I think that influences how we interpret this passage.

So there are three possibilities. One is the rock is Peter. And not that we take straw polls to see what interpretations are but I have included that here just for your information. I thought it was interesting that 17 of the early church fathers agreed that it was Peter and eight more said it included Peter and added the rest of the apostles. So, the rock is either Peter or the apostles, this group says. The second answers says no, the rock is Christ. Sixteen of the church fathers said that. By early church fathers you understand what we mean, those in the early days of the church after the death of the apostles and before the Middle Ages, in that period of time. Sixteen of them, in their writings, say no, the rock is Christ Himself. And of course, Christ is portrayed as a rock in other places in Scripture. A third view of this rock is that it is, in fact, Peter’s confession. Forty-four of the early church fathers took this view, that it is not Peter and it is not Christ, although Christ is certainly a rock, but in this context the rock upon which the church will be built is the confession that Peter made about the nature of Jesus Christ and His mission.

Now folks, in the end it does not really matter a lot. Let me show you why. Let’s assume for a moment that Peter is the rock. If it is Peter, it is not Peter in and of himself. It is related here to his confession. In fact, just a few verses later, look down in verse 22, “Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him,” after Jesus said He was going to be crucified, “saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You.’” This is a bad plan, Lord. “But He turned to Peter,” verse 23, “and He said, ‘Get behind Me, Satan!’” You see, when Peter was right about Christ he was the rock on which the church would be built, when he was wrong just a few verses later he was Satan. So this isn’t just about Peter and some great person that he was. He was a man who was a man of clay feet, just as we are.

By the way, if you want to read an absolutely, some of you who have Catholic families, who have heard a lot of Catholic theology about Peter being the first pope and all of that, if you want to read an absolutely crushing blow to that view get Robert Raymond’s *Systematic Theology* and read the section on Matthew 16:18. He traces through about 16 or 17 reasons why that is absolutely impossible. It is a crushing blow to that view.

But I think sometimes as Protestants we steer away from wanting to say it is Peter simply because we are afraid that we are going to seem Catholic. It is possible that it is Peter, and as you can see there were many in the early church before the time of the Catholic church who

believed that in fact it was Peter. But, if it is Peter it is not just Peter, it is what Peter was saying at that moment. As Clowney writes, “In confessing Jesus to be the Christ he was the rock. In tempting Jesus to refuse the cross he is Satan.” So, understand that if it is Peter, that is what we are talking about. Ultimately it comes back to his confession either way.

If it is Christ, if the rock here is Christ, then it is the truth about Christ contained in the confession of Peter. And if it is the confession then it is Peter’s confession about the true nature of Jesus. You see what I am saying? It does not really matter, in the end they are all connected, they are all related. It is in essence the same as Paul’s comment that the church is built on what? The foundation of the apostles. And by that he did not mean because they were such wonderful people, he meant because they had been selected sovereignly by God to be the purveyors of the revelation of God and the church is built on their words and their writings.

So, what can we draw about the church and when it began from verse 18 and what Christ says? Well, there are three conclusions I think that we can draw from Christ’s words. Number one, the church was still future when Christ spoke these words. He says, “I will build.” So at this point in the ministry of Christ the church is still future. Secondly, I think we can conclude that the church is distinct from but related to the kingdom of God. Notice verse 19. He has just said, “I am going to build my church,” and then He says “I will give you,” singular here, this is probably to Peter, “I will give you,” Peter, “the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

Basically He was giving him authority to practice the discipline of the church. By the way, this same statement is made just a little bit later in another gospel, of all the apostles, so it is not just Peter; it is all the apostles that are included here. But notice, He says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven.” So, we can conclude that while the church is distinct from the kingdom of Heaven it is related to it. And the third thing we can conclude is that the church is distinct from the nation of Israel. How can we conclude that? Well, Israel already existed and yet Jesus says, “I will build My church.” The allusion is to a new entity, to a separate entity. Since Israel already existed but the church was still future, it must be distinct from Israel.

So, that is our first little clue that we get in Matthew 16:18. Let’s turn now to the book of Ephesians because there are several more clues in Ephesians. Ephesians 1:20, Paul is in the middle of a prayer here and he says, I want God’s power to be at work in you and this is “in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ,” verse 20,

when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, and far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

Notice now, we are talking about verse 20, the resurrection of Christ “when He raised Jesus from the dead.” Verse 22, “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him,” at one point in time, “as head over all things to the church, which is His body.” The clear implication of this passage, and we would not build our entire case on it, but the implication is that the church did not come about, that Christ did not become the Head of this new entity, until after what? The resurrection. So there is another little clue to begin to build our case.

But Paul goes on, notice Ephesians 2:14. Let’s skip back to verse 11, because this is where the paragraph begins. He says, “remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh,” so he is talking now to Gentiles, which is of course most of what the church in Ephesus would have been, “remember that you were at that time,” and in verse 12 he details the previous state of Gentiles, before the work of Christ this is what we were like, and he lists five very negative statements: “you were separate from Christ,” from the Messiah, “you were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel,” you had no legal rights, “you were strangers to the covenants of promise,” you were not included in the promises made to the Old Testament people of God, “having no hope and you were without God in the world.” That was our desperate situation.

But notice in verse 13 a new state for Gentiles has been initiated, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” So, in other words, the whole situation has been reversed. And then he explains what he means by this,

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups, [*that is, Jews and Gentiles,*] one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments, [*so somehow the law stood as a dividing wall between the Jews and Gentiles*] so that in Himself [*watch verse 15*] He might make the two into one new man.

You get the picture? Here the idea is not our becoming part of the church as it had always existed, but rather the creation of something entirely new and different. Therefore in verse 19 he says, “you are now fellow citizens with the saints, you are God’s household,” a reference of course to the church, verse 21, you are part of this “whole building,” this “holy temple unto the Lord. You are being built together into the dwelling of God in the Spirit.” So here is yet another hint that there was something new that happened with the sacrifice of Christ.

Now turn over to chapter 3 verse 5. He is talking about a mystery here. Biblically speaking a mystery is something which was not previously known, at least in its entirety. It may have been hinted at, it may have been prophesied, there may have been clues to it, but it was not fully and completely known and expressed, but “now has been revealed” by God. Verse 5, “in other generations this mystery was not made known to the sons of men,” at least in its fullness and its entirety,

as it has now been revealed to His Holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific [*here it is, here is this great mystery,*] that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace.

And he goes on in verses 9 and 10 to say that this mystery which was "hidden in God" is now being made known through the church. The mystery is the church. The mystery is in the church. The two are being made one and of course as we have seen, that happens through the sacrifice of Christ.

The mystery revealed was not that God would bless the Gentiles, that was promised throughout the Old Testament, even back as far as Genesis 12:3. You remember, "in you all the nations of the earth will be [*What?*] blessed." So what is the difference? What is the big difference that he is talking about? Well, in Galatians 3:28 I think he puts it very clearly, "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Those distinctions have been done away. This is a new thing.

Now, the timing gets a little clearer in Ephesians 4. In Ephesians 4 the ascension of Christ is mentioned. Verse 8 "HE ASCENDED ON HIGH." Verse 9, "He ascended," and with that, in verse 10 we are told again, "He ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things." And with this ascension notice several things happened. At the ascension we are told, verses 7 and 8, He gave spiritual gifts to the church,

to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.
Therefore it says,

"WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES.
[*All those spiritual powers He defeated.*]
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."
[*A reference to spiritual gifts.*]

At the Ascension this was accomplished. Notice in verse 11, at the same time something else happened, Christ gave the church gifted men, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, for the building up of the body of Christ." So at the ascension spiritual gifts were directed and spiritual men were given to the church, and so the church could not have existed what? Prior to that time, prior to the ascension.

Now there is one last verse that is very interesting, you see it here on the screen. It is in 1 Corinthians 12. It says, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Now stay with me

here, I am going to give you a little logical argument. We are told here that the church is being built by believers being baptized by Christ with the Holy Spirit. Christ does the baptism and He immerses every believer with the Spirit. And by this Spirit baptism every Christian is immersed into the body of Christ. And of course we just learned from Ephesians that the church is the body of Christ. And all of this takes place at the moment of regeneration.

Now keep all of that in mind. We are talking about Spirit baptism. When did that happen? That is how the church is built. So before the baptism of the Spirit, the baptism with the Spirit, the church did not exist. Well, in Acts 1:5, turn there with me, let's see if at this point there was this Spirit baptism that immersed believers into the body of Christ, which is the church. In Acts 1:5, at that point Jesus said to His disciples, ““you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit [*What?*] not many days from now.”” So that immersion in or with the Spirit that is necessary to join us to the body of Christ has not happened yet. And so it is safe to argue that the church itself has not yet begun.

So when does this happen? What is Jesus referencing here? Well, when you get to Acts 2 there is no specific reference to the baptism with the Spirit. But turn over to Acts 11, in Acts 11 we are told in verse 15 as Peter reports what happened with Cornelius and the gospel going to the Gentiles, he says in verse 15,

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God’s way.

Now, do you follow what Peter just said? He said, listen, what happened at Cornelius’ is what happened to us at the beginning, and that was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The beginning here can only mean one thing. What? Back to chapter 2 of Acts, Pentecost. So the apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, as Jesus promised in Acts 1, and they were at the same time immersed into the body of Christ. So, when you look at all of the time references in the New Testament it seems clear that Pentecost was the beginning of the church as we know it.

Now, as soon as we say that, and I think we can say that conclusively, then the question is, another second important question comes up, and that is, well, if the church is a new thing, how does it relate to Israel and what was God doing with Israel and how does that compare with what He is doing with us? Let me ask you, before we begin to look at this (Because I know some of you look at that question and you go, who cares?), why does this really matter? This is not just a how many angels can stand on the head of a pin kind of argument. An argument strictly for theologians. This question and the answer to it, listen carefully to me, has huge ramifications for every Christian.

For example, how you answer this question determines how you read and interpret more than half of your Bible, that portion we call the Old Testament. How you answer this question tends to influence your conclusions about practical issues like whether you keep the Sabbath, whether you dedicate your babies or baptize them, and what kind of church you and your family will attend. And it dramatically affects your view of the future. So this is not an unimportant question. This is absolutely crucial, at a foundational level, to even how you read your Bible.

But the question, I have to tell you, is not an easy one. Let me begin with you tonight, I am not going to complete this tonight, I hope to finish it next week, but I want to begin with you by sort of leading you through the process. There are basically three primary positions about the relationship of Israel and the church. Please stick with me. I know this is going to be a little bit of heavy sledding, but trust me, you have to understand this to answer these crucial questions I have just asked.

There are three primary positions today in evangelicalism about the relationship between Israel and the church. The first is called covenantalism. Now, when it comes to much of what the covenantalists teach, we wholeheartedly agree, because covenantalism is primarily a doctrine or a teaching about the doctrine of salvation. What we just studied together as we went through the doctrine of salvation, most of our covenantal brothers would embrace, and we wholeheartedly agree and we fellowship together and we have a lot in common with them on the issue of the doctrine of salvation. In fact, we have just about everything in common with them on the doctrine of salvation. However, when it comes to this question, we absolutely do not agree with covenantalism, what is the relationship between Israel and the church?

There are two predominant views within covenantalism. The first view is that the entire nation of Israel was, in fact, the Old Testament church. It was a church just like this is a church in Southlake. It was, in every sense, in every way that we talk about the New Testament church, absolutely identical to the entire nation of Israel. Louis Berkhof, for example, takes this position in his *Systematic Theology*. He writes, "In essence Israel constituted the church of God in the Old Testament. Though its external institution differed vastly from that of the church in the New Testament." That is just another way to say, they were a nation and we are not. But in essence it was the church in every sense that we think of the church in Corinth, or the church in Thessalonica, or the church in Southlake.

Another view in covenantalism, a second variation of that, is that no, not the entire nation was the Old Testament church but rather, it is more accurate and better to say that the true believers in the nation of Israel were identical to the New Testament church. But not the entire nation, but rather those within Israel who were true Israel, as Paul says in Romans 9.

So, these are the two views. By the way, Robert Raymond takes this view, this second view, that the true believers in Israel were the church. Listen to what he writes, "The church of God in Old Testament times blossomed mainly within the nation of Israel. However, this church was not

equivalent to the nation of Israel per se. For there were always some and sometimes many if not most within that nation who were never more than the physical seed of Abraham, who never possessed more than the outward circumcision of the flesh, and who thus were never the spiritual seed of Abraham.” In other words, they may have been physical descendants of Abraham but they were not true believers like Abraham was. He goes on to say, “The true church of the Old Testament was the spiritual seed of Abraham, that Israel within the nation of Israel, about whom the apostle Paul speaks in Romans 9.”

So those are the two views. How do they defend the view that there was a church in the Old Testament? Well, essentially they give five arguments and I am going to answer these, Lord willing, next week, so I am not going to answer them now, I am just going to give them to you. They say, well, the name assembly or congregation was given to Israel in the Old Testament which of course is what the word church, *ekklesia*, means, assembly as we saw, and the Septuagint translators, two hundred years before Christ, used this word *ekklesia* to describe Old Testament Israel.

A second argument they use is that the New Testament church is called the temple of God. Doesn't that sound Jewish to you? Doesn't that sound Old Testament to you? And so there must be continuity in the sense of the church existing in the Old Testament just as it exists in the New. Thirdly, they would say not only does Jesus promise to build the church in the future, as we saw in Matthew 16, but He recognized it as already existing in Matthew 18.

Fourthly, they would say, well, look at what Stephen says in his sermon in Acts 7, he refers to Israel as the *ekklesia* in the wilderness, the church or assembly in the wilderness. And then finally, even Paul, they would say, equates the Old Testament and the church in a couple of passages, in Romans 11 and Ephesians 2; they would also point up a couple of others that we will look at next week in Galatians 6:16 and so forth. So, those are their arguments. That is the view that covenantalists take, there was a church in the Old Testament; it was either the entire nation or the true believers within the nation.

A second of the primary positions, we have already looked at covenantalism, a second primary position is that of what is called traditional or classic dispensationalism. This started about 200 years ago with a man who lived from 1800 to 1882 by the name of John Nelson Darby of Plymouth Brethren. It was popularized, and many of you grew up as I did reading the C.I. Scofield Reference Bible. And of course here in Dallas, Lewis Sperry Chafer and Charles Ryrie are also, Ryrie is, a traditional or classic dispensationalist.

Now, traditional dispensationalism taught that God has two completely distinct purposes in human history. One for the earth through Israel and a second for heaven through the church. Let me give you a quote by Chafer that puts this in perspective. He says, “The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes. One related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism, while the other is related

to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.” So, he would say, no, there was no church in the Old Testament, and in fact, they have absolutely no resemblance now and will never have any connection. There is no point in eternity in which they will ever connect and certainly not in time.

In fact, these early traditional or classic dispensationalists even taught and I don’t know that they fully intended to put it this way, but this is what they said, that there were two distinct ways of salvation. For example, if you look at your old version of the Scofield Reference Bible, in a note on 1 John 3:7 Scofield wrote this, “The righteous man under law became righteous by doing righteously. Under grace he does righteously because he has been made righteous.” In other words, Old Testament Israel, this earthly people, they were saved by being righteous, we are saved as a heavenly people by being declared righteous.

Scofield again, in commenting on the petition of the Lord’s Prayer to “forgive us our debts,” he says this, “This is legal ground. Under law forgiveness is conditioned upon a like spirit in us. Under grace we are forgiven for Christ’s sake and exhorted to forgive because we have been forgiven.” So you see the attitude and the mindset, there was this utter distinction between Israel and the church. Israel was an earthly people, even perhaps saved a different way, they will always be an earthly people, always bound to the earth, whereas the church is a heavenly people bound for heaven and bound and saved a different way, saved through the imputed righteousness of Christ.

This view also would embrace, this traditional or classic dispensationalism, would say that Israel and the church will always be separate, even in eternity future. For some of them, not for all of them but for some, even in eternity Israel will occupy the New Earth and the church will occupy heaven, basically. So we will always be separate, separate compartments, even in eternity. For others, like Charles Ryrie, they have mediated that position with agreement that both Israel and the church will share the heavenly Jerusalem in the new heavens.

So, those are two views, covenantalism and traditional or classic dispensationalism, and their views about the relationship between Israel and the church. Now folks, I have to tell you that as a whole I do not, I cannot agree with either. And that is why I am thankful for a third position that really encapsulates my own position, what I believe the Scriptures teach, not covenantalism, not traditional or classic dispensationalism, but progressive dispensationalism.

I am, as my mentor John MacArthur likes to say, a leaky dispensationalist. I personally prefer progressive dispensationalist. Now, if you want to read some about this, if you are just really sitting there thinking, I have got to read more about this issue, I recommend Robert Saucy’s book *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*. It will give you a heady but good exposure to this issue.

Now, what does progressive dispensationalism teach about the relationship between Israel and the church? Well, I want you to see that progressive dispensationalism, and I believe accurately reflecting the Scriptures, believes that there are great, great similarities between Israel and the church. Let me just run through those with you briefly in the few minutes we have remaining.

First of all, both Israel and the church contain the true people of God. There is no question that but when you look in the Old Testament, Israel was the focal point of the people of God. Were there believers in other places? Yes, I believe there were, and I believe you have that hinted at, for example, with the widow of Zarephath and other Old Testament stories. And, of course, there were those who came to embrace the faith of Yahweh who were not originally part of Israel, like Rahab the harlot, like Ruth, but who came to embrace the truth about God. But primarily God's people were housed in a nation. The same thing is said of the church today. The church is the place of the true people of God.

Secondly, they are similar in the fact that both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are saved by the work of Christ. Listen folks, when you go back, in fact let's go back, to Genesis 3. In the context of Genesis 3, man has just fallen. Adam and Eve have made a terrible choice of sin. And as a result of that, God brings upon them and upon the whole earth, a curse. But in the midst of that curse comes a promise. A promise that should excite your soul the way it excited Adam and Eve's souls. Listen to what God says, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed;" speaking here to the serpent, "he shall bruise you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel." He shall crush your head, and in the process of crushing your head, you will simply bruise His heel.

Here is a prophecy, given about a coming person, a person who would bring about a permanent and final remedy to Satan and to sin. Don't you for a moment believe that Old Testament believers didn't look back and hang themselves and their hope on the person who would come who would destroy the sin. You know, I have heard people say, well, you know Old Testament believers, all they really believed was that somehow that animal they killed was going to atone for their sin. Listen, they were not stupid. They could read Genesis 3 just like you and I could read it.

They understood, through this passage, and then as time comes along there is another promise, and more directed promise, of who this person would be and where He would come from, until you get to Micah and we are even told what town He would be born in. And of course Isaiah tells us all that He would accomplish. These people were looking for a person who would be the final sacrifice. They didn't understand all that we understood, all that we understand rather. They didn't understand that He would be the second person of the Trinity and all the things that we understand about His nature, that the New Testament makes clear to us, but they did understand He would be a person and they did understand that He would come to put a final end to sin, and they longed and looked forward to that.

So when Christ comes, His death does not merely provide for our salvation from everything from that time future, His death provided for those in the past as well. You see this in so many places. I love Romans 1:1-2, “Paul, a bond servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle set apart for the gospel of God which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” And when you get to the book of Acts, Paul and the apostles are continually reminding the people they talk to that the gospel they are preaching about a Messiah was in the Old Testament and that was where they hung their hope.

Both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are saved by the work of Christ. As you have heard it so many times, they looked forward to a person who would put an end to sin, and we look back, but the cross and Christ accomplished the salvation of both.

Thirdly, both Old Testament Israel and the church appropriate that salvation that Christ accomplished in the same way, and that is by faith alone. Don't you for a moment believe C.I. Scofield, that they were somehow saved by law. Let me show you how clear Paul is with this. Look at Romans 3:21. Paul, as he now begins to introduce the gospel, he says, “But now,” in contrast to your sin, in contrast to all of mankind's sin that he has been talking about from Romans 1:18 all the way through chapter 3 verse 20, he says in contrast to all of that, “apart from the Law,” apart from keeping the Law, there has been this “righteousness of God that has been manifested.” The word manifested simply means to become known, to be plainly recognized, to be thoroughly understood.

When did the righteousness of God become clear, plainly recognized? Paul is implying here that in the recent past a decisive event had occurred. That event, of course, is the ministry and death of Jesus Christ. Does that mean that justification by faith is a new truth? That is what Paul's Jewish opponents accused him of, inventing a new way to God. But is this righteousness from God given as a gift, he goes on to say, something entirely new? Paul says, absolutely not. Look at what he says, no, this righteousness I am telling you about, this imputed righteousness is being “manifested” or “witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” This is in the present tense, it is being witnessed to. As you read this letter, Romans, it is being witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets, the entire Old Testament.

The verb translated “to witness” means to testify about or validate as true. So Paul's point is that the entire Old Testament constantly testifies to the fact that God declares believing sinners righteous by faith alone. Leon Morris writes, “It is not some minor truth,” talking about justification by faith alone, “tucked away in an obscure corner of Scripture, but a great truth blazoned forth in both Law and Prophets.”

You say, well, what exactly does the Old Testament have to say about that? Well, as I just showed you as early as Genesis 3:15, God reveals that men's only hope is found in one very special person. And Paul begins Romans by reminding his readers that the gospel was promised, as we see there in Romans 1, in the Old Testament, and then he cites as a great Old Testament

text, in Romans 1:17, as proof of his message, Habakkuk 2:4, those declared righteous by faith shall live. Then he continues in chapter 4, where he argues that this is how God saved Abraham, verses 1 to 6, and David, verses 7 to 8.

You say, but, okay, I see it was there and this is how God accomplished it, but was the Old Testament revelation clear enough for Old Testament believers to understand? Well, when confronted by Jewish leaders, listen to what Paul said, “I stand to this day testifying to both small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said.” That is what Paul said about his ministry of the gospel about justification by faith alone. Justification is not some new plan cooked up by a first century Pharisee. It is the way every saint from Adam on has gained right standing with God. It has always been God’s plan, it is the way Old Testament Israelites came into right relation to God and it is the way we come into right relationship to God.

Another similarity is that both have benefitted from the work of the Spirit. In the work of regeneration, bringing new life to their hearts, sanctifying them, setting them apart, and even the abiding presence of the Spirit. Now, John 14 to 16 seems to indicate that with Pentecost there was some change in the work of the Spirit, but these realities were still there and we saw them, we talked about these things as we talked about the nature of God and the nature of salvation in past months. They benefitted, the Old Testament Israelites who were true believers, from the work of the Spirit in their lives to accomplish these things and we benefit from these things as well.

Both were assigned the same responsibility, and that is to be a witness nation. Israel, you see this in Exodus 19 there at Sinai, God tells them why He is entering into covenant with them. He says,

“You are going to be My possession among all the peoples, for the earth is Mine, all the earth is Mine, and you are going to be for Me a kingdom of priests.”

You are going to be those who help the nations understand what I am like. And the same thing is said of the church. First Peter 2:5, you are going to be “a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices.” But more specifically in Revelation 1:6, “He has made us,” the church, “to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father.” Revelation 5:10, “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

Finally, both are beneficiaries of the new covenant, wonderful promises that are made in the new covenant. Israel, in Jeremiah 31:31, we read, the “days are coming, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” And yet the church also participates in that new covenant. In 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul quotes Jesus on the night of His crucifixion, or the night of the Last Supper rather, saying that He took the cup and He said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood,” you are going to partake of the benefits of the new covenant. And it is true, Paul told the Corinthians, for you as well. Gentiles get in on the

new covenant. Second Corinthians 3:6, Paul said he was a servant, a minister of the new covenant. And in Hebrews 8 we are told that Jesus was our “mediator of a better covenant,” the new covenant.

So, you can see that there are a lot of similarities. Understand this, folks, if you compare, listen very carefully to what I am going to say, if you compare the true believers in the Old Testament Israel with us, we have much more in common than we have differences. However, although Israel and the church are similar in many ways, as we have seen tonight, and there are others, they are not identical. Next week we will look at the differences.

But before we leave tonight, I want to apply this that we have talked about. Turn with me to Romans 15. I am going show you two passages that bring home why this is important. Why is it important to know that we have so much in common with Old Testament believers? First of all, Romans 15:4, he says, “whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction,” this is a reference to the Old Testament, “so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Listen folks, when you read your Old Testament it is because of the continuity that we enjoy with them, it is because of the similarity between their spiritual struggles and ours, the similarities between their justification and ours, the similarities between their great hope of a future and of a “city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God,” that we have a point of commonality with them. And that as we read those stories, as we read those accounts, we gain hope. It is because of the similarities we enjoy, that we can read the Old Testament and find our great hope strengthened.

Hope, by the way, as I always remind you, biblically, is not like the English word hope which includes a lot of desire but very little hope of it really happening. The Greek word for hope is a word that speaks both of desire and of certainty. I hope in the sense of I know and I am eager with expectation for it to be accomplished. And when we look at the Old Testament, we look at those people and we look at how God responded to them, it gives us hope.

Turn to Hebrews 11, the end of this great chapter, the hall of faith as it is so often called. The writer of Hebrews has gone through godly man after godly man and godly women of the past who gave themselves to God, who followed Him, who lived a life of faith. Verse 39, he says,

And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that they apart from us would not be made perfect.

Listen, we share a continuity with them. “Therefore,” here is the application, “since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us.” Now, sometimes we read that passage and we get a wrong view of what it means. It does not mean, you know, you sometimes hear it pictured as there is this great stadium of people up in heaven sort of cheering us on, that is not the point of this great cloud of witness. The point is that we have in the chapter 11 a list of those who have

gone before us, who have lived a life of faith, who have seen the rewards to some degree of that life of faith but who died in expectation that the full fulfillment was yet to come. And folks, they are our witnesses that we can live a life of faith in full expectation as they did, that there is a great day coming when we will be in the presence of God and all that was faith will be made what? Sight.

Listen, it is very important to know that we share so much with these brothers and sisters in Christ, now in Christ, that we read about in the Old Testament. It was not the church. But we have so much to be grateful for that they went and blazed the trail before us and we follow with them as our witnesses that the path of faith is a path that leads to the presence of God. Let's pray together.

Father, we are so grateful for Your Word. It is impossible for us to thank You for this precious Word, the external Word, not some subjective feeling inside of us but a forever settled in heaven Word in letters and words and sentences, where You have revealed Your mind to us. Father, we thank You and we thank You for the fact that we can grasp it, that we can study it, that You have given us the mental capacity to do that, and more than mental capacity, by Your Spirit You illumine Your truth so that we can understand it, so that it comes alive, takes spiritual life in our hearts. Lord, I pray that these things that we have discussed tonight would not be dead truths that leave us unmoved. Father, help us to understand their great significance. Thank You for the great cloud of witnesses, those who have lived a life of faith before us and even now stand in Your presence. Lord, help us to be faithful as they were until death. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.