



Chapter 7: The story of the People of God

A. How the story unfolds

1. Created for intimacy with God

God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and shaped Eve from the rib of Adam. From them God ordained a human race. His intention was that they would reproduce, multiply, fill the earth, and be his people. We learn from Genesis 3:8-10 that God normally met with his people on a daily basis for communication and fellowship. It seems that God wanted and looked forward to contact with people made in his image.

Initially, it was just two people. God lived among them, and they enjoyed contact with God with no barriers. On this side of the fall into sin, it is difficult to imagine how wonderful this intimacy must have been for Adam and Eve. God repeatedly reminds us throughout Scripture that he desires to be with his people, indicating that he has not given up on the original plan.

2. Independence and Self-will

The entrance of sin changed everything. When they disobeyed God's command, they began to experience alienation from God. Barriers interrupted the previous state of uninhibited joy in God's presence. Fear and shame caused them to hide from the voice of God. Enmity and resentment caused them to seek escape from God. God's curse and banishment of them from the garden caused them to be further removed. The fellowship had been broken.

Adam and Eve were still God's people, but they needed to be saved from their sin. As children and grandchildren were born, they were born into a condemned and depraved humanity. God set in motion his plan of salvation to redeem them to himself again. God could have chosen to make a new humanity and people of God that was identical to the original one. In other words, to save each and every human sinner. The Bible indicates, however, that he chose instead to call out of the old humanity a people for his name. In other words, some would be saved and others would not.

None would be saved on the basis of their natural goodness or inclination to believe. The effects of sin were such that all humans without exception are self-willed, rebellious, and inclined to reject and hate God. Only by a radical spiritual transformation called new birth would any of us be willing to turn from our sin and seek God. God's new people would not be a race of people who inherit spiritual life from their parents, but a selection of people from among the human race who would individually receive spiritual life by an act of God.

In God's plan, human history would be lived out in two distinct groups of people. One group would be the unchanged sinful descendants of Adam and Eve; the other would be the called-out and transformed children of God. The Bible characterizes these two groups in various ways, but one of the ways is to refer to them as "Babylon" and "Jerusalem."

The beginnings of Babylon are told in Genesis 11:1-9. Noah's descendants, instead of spreading out to fill the earth as God instructed them, gathered in Mesopotamia to build a city and a tower. Their purpose was "to make a name for ourselves and not be scattered." God confused their languages so that they could not work together, resulting in their being scattered anyway. But the "babble" of Babylon remained as a symbol for the self-will and self-promotion of the old humanity.

The book of Revelation shows how this story of Babylon ends. Symbolized as the city of Babylon, and as a harlot, the "old humanity" group of people worships the "beast" of the end times and receives his "mark." They persecute the other group of people who worship the "Lamb" and receive his "mark." The "new humanity" is symbolized as the city of Jerusalem, the holy city, and as a bride. At the end of history the "Babylon" old humanity is destroyed and the "Jerusalem" new humanity comes down from heaven to live in the New Heaven and New Earth. Read the entire series of visions in Revelation 17-22.

3. Called-out

In Genesis 12 God began his plan for a new humanity. He called Abraham to leave his country and family in Ur of the Chaldeans and travel to a new land that God would give to his descendants. Abraham and his family were taken out of their culture and idolatry to be God's people. They left the geographical region of Babylon and settled in the geographical region of Jerusalem. But as God's people, the move was even more dramatic. They remained distinct from all other peoples. Abraham believed God and became the father of all who believe. The calling to be God's people would be based on faith.

In Exodus we get our next glimpse of God's plan to call out a people for himself. Abraham's descendants had moved to Egypt to escape a famine and became enslaved there. Under Moses and God's power, God brought his people out of slavery to become His own people. Exodus 6:6-8 tells us God's desire, "I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God."

When they reached Mt. Sinai, God clarified that calling. "Though the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:3-6). The covenant God made there was a national covenant, but people's participation in it was based on individual faith. Hebrews 3:7-19 informs us that while all the nation came out of Egypt with Moses, some were not able to enter the promised land because of unbelief.

God had planned for Israel to demonstrate the benefits of trusting in the living God and to broadcast the revelation of God to the other nations. They were to be God's priests to mediate his grace to the whole world. In a few isolated situations, Israel influenced other nations (Jonah, 1 Kings 10, 2 Kings 5, Daniel 4). But in general, they failed to communicate the good news to others.

At the end of the 70 years of Babylonian Captivity, God once again called his people out of the world of unbelief and idolatry to be a separate people for himself. In Jeremiah 32:36-41 God says, "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I

will give them singleness of heart and action, so they will always fear me for their own good." God called them his own people and became their God, plus he promised a new covenant that included the needed transformation of heart.

4. Immanuel

The turning point in God's plan to live among his own people is the coming of Christ as Immanuel (God with us). Before anyone could become one of God's called-out people, He had to provide a solution for human sin. God became human, through the Incarnation, to die as a sacrifice on behalf of human sinners. His death and resurrection enabled the new creation, to restore the conditions of the old creation before sin spoiled it.

All who lived prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and believed God's promises to make them his own people were trusting in a future salvation. They anticipated a future time of restoration when God would live among them and be their God. All who have lived since the coming of Jesus Christ and believe the gospel of Christ's work are trusting in a past provision that is complete. But the time of restoration is still future for us also. Hebrews 11:40 tells us God planned a fulfillment for Old Testament believers and New Testament believers so that we will all receive it together at the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 of the necessity of the new birth in order to have a new humanity to enter into the kingdom of God. No one can see or enter the kingdom of God without experiencing a new birth from above. There is no command to "be born again" as if it were an action we can perform. The Holy Spirit does his work as he pleases and places the seed of spiritual life into individual hearts. This new birth (sometimes translated "regeneration") changes us from the inside, inclining us to seek God, to understand the message of Christ, and to trust in him for salvation.

5. New Humanity

Jesus' followers are charged with the commission of "making disciples of all nations" so that the new humanity will be representative of the ethnic make-up of the old. The visions of Revelation reflect that this will happen, "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). The "register of the peoples" in Psalm 87 is evidently the same as the "Lamb's book of life" in Revelation 20, showing that our nationalities are recorded along with our names to ensure a representative new humanity.

Within the church, however, there is no longer Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, as separate denominations. Instead, God breaks down the barriers and makes of the diverse variety of humanity "one new man" (Ephesians 2:11-22). The "new creation" of 2 Corinthians 5:17 is a thorough change. Though we are to be law-abiding citizens of our earthly countries, our true citizenship is in heaven, as Paul wrote to the Philippians.

Like Abraham, we are called to separate ourselves from the worldview and lifestyle of the old humanity among whom we live. We are not to isolate ourselves

physically or relationally from the world, because we have discipling to do here. But a day is coming when the Lord will call us to himself. We will then populate the new earth as the new humanity. God will live among us and be our God; we will be his people forever.

B. Scripture for further study in tracing the story through the Bible

1. Descendants of Noah

Genesis 10 describes the separation of prehistoric humanity according to the descent of Japheth, Ham, and Shem. As people spread out over the world, distinctions arose among them.

2. Let us make a name for ourselves and not be scattered

Genesis 11:1-9 tells how sinful humans defied God's command and tried to establish their own reputation. God separated them by language and geography so that their rebellion would be hampered for most of history. Acts 17:26-27 affirms that God continues to determine the places where people live, for the purpose of encouraging them to seek him.

3. Call of Abraham

Notice the contrast between the Babel-onians who wanted to make a name for themselves and Abraham who received God's promise in Genesis 12:1-3, "I will make your name great." God called Abraham to separate himself from the world and become a nation through whom God could bless the world.

4. Call of Israel

In Exodus 19:3-8 God designated his chosen people as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Through them, God would fulfill his claim on the whole world. Deuteronomy 29:1-29 describes a renewal of the covenant of Mt. Sinai. Israel was still to be a witness to the nations. Notice verses 14-15, "I am making this covenant not only with you who are standing here today, but also with those who are not here today."

5. This one was born in Zion

Psalms 87 celebrates God's people and their city Zion. But it also indicates that people from other countries will come to believe in the true God. Those believers from Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, etc. will be recorded as having been born in Zion. They have become part of the new humanity by faith in Israel's God.

6. Come out from them and be separate

At the end of the 70 year Babylonian Captivity, God called his people to "Leave Babylon" to avoid being destroyed with it (Isaiah 48:20). Revelation 18:1-5 repeats this call to separate from the old humanity as it is being destroyed at the end. In the meantime, we are called in the Christian life (2 Corinthians 6:14-18) to be separated morally and spiritually from the world.

7. Many will come from East and West

After a Roman centurion showed greater faith than most Israelites (Matthew 8:5-13), Jesus said that many Gentiles would join as part of the people of God from east and west, while unbelieving physical descendants of Israel would be cast out. God's people are defined by faith, not by ancestry.

8. A people for his name

The story of God calling out from the old humanity a new people for his name is told by James in Acts 15:13-21. The Gentile believers didn't have to become Jewish to be part of God's people, but they should show respect for Jewish customs. Jewish believers must accept Gentile believers as equals, but they may continue to observe their Jewishness. "Don't make it difficult."

9. We really are children of God

Amazing as it seems, we really are children of God through the new birth (1 John 2:28 - 3:3). We don't know all that we will be, but when we see Him as He is, the transformation will be complete. In the meantime, we work on purifying ourselves.

10. The people God gave to Jesus

Jesus made it clear in John 6:35-69 that no one can come to him unless the Father draws him. All that the Father gave to Jesus will come to him. The new humanity is a gift from the Father to the Son out of the existing humanity. See also Jesus' prayer in John 17:6-19.

11. The dwelling of God

The desire of God through the thousands of years comes to fulfillment in Revelation 21:1-8. The voice from the throne thunders out, "Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

C. Discussion Questions:

1. Is it arrogant for Christians to claim to be God's people and to say that some others are not God's people? How can we be glad about our status and still be humble? What about other religions that claim to be God's chosen people? What about our loved ones who are not yet among God's people?

2. Are there some Christians who, with you, are God's people that you just don't like? Can you imagine spending eternity with them? Would that be "heaven"? Why do we continue little feuds with people? What assignment could we take on to prepare to live well with God's people?

3. Memorize 1 Peter 2:9-10, Reflect on the privilege of being welcomed as one of God's people by his mercy.

4. Trace the story of God's People through the Bible. Notice how he blends Gentiles into the line of Christ; watch him by-pass children of the covenant who refuse to believe; get the message about how important it is to God to live with his people.