

Contents

The PLAN

Reclaiming All Things for God's Glory

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Concerning a Plan

**Either there is a plan, or there isn't.
And how you decide the matter will impact
your life profoundly.**

Without a plan, existence has little meaning. We behave like random molecules knocking about without a purpose.

Many people live like this.

They are easy to identify – human beings seeking to create their own meaning and chart their own course by looking to the desires of their own hearts and pursuing them relentlessly.

In short, people design their own plan.

But, in the end, it's always a defective plan. It doesn't work.

Pursuing their own interests, human beings inevitably collide with other human beings doing the same thing and the result is messy: interpersonal enmity, strife, and division.

In other words, left to our own plans, we plunge into relational confusion and discord, with all the related emptiness and pain.

This is the world as we know it.

But there's hope for our world, hope for our lives – and it's a radiant hope. It's also an accessible hope, as close as the silent longing of our hearts.

Intuitively, we know things ought to be better. We know love ought to triumph over hate, peace over war, life over death.

How do we know these things except for the fact that buried deeply in our subconscious is the 'memory' of a better way . . . of a better plan.

**People design their
own plan.
But, in the end, it's al-
ways a defective plan.
It doesn't work.**

Nowhere is this intuition more strikingly confirmed than in the Bible. There, and there only, we find The PLAN, the remarkable plan of God for the world.

What we have subconsciously desired, but in our futile pursuits have failed to discover, God now mercifully reveals – the good news of a better plan.

Single words, summary adjectives, fail to capture its beauty. So we must allow

the word of God to unveil its glory step by step, in chronological order, the story of God's plan rolled out in a magnificent biblical theology.

Too seldom do Christians read the Bible in this way. We are experts of little truths, but novices of the big picture.

But it's the big picture, the big plan, that nourishes the soul at the deepest level and propels our steps to unparalleled heights, to lives of radical significance and exciting usefulness, to legacies of eternal duration.

What could possibly launch such a plan?

Something only God could conceive – a killing tree outside Jerusalem and, three days later, a vacant tomb!

Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected – **He** is God's plan. Through him, God is reclaiming all things for his glory!

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In the next ten weeks, as we assimilate The PLAN together, we will marvel at how its details make complete sense of this world – describing the world's defects, the world's suffering, and the world's need of salvation. Nothing anywhere, not from any human source at any time, so perfectly captures our existence as The PLAN.

And you will, by God's grace, resolve to walk in step (for the rest of your earthly life and throughout eternity) with the unfolding drama of this plan.

To be at the center of God's plan in Jesus Christ is a bit of heaven on earth!

Get ready to immerse yourself in The PLAN: to study its storyline, to memorize its salient truths, and to apply yourself to living it out.

It is my earnest prayer that God would breathe his word into our hearts in the ensuing weeks and by his indwelling power transform our lives into his image, making us collectively, as a body, the local church of Jesus Christ . . .

**. . . a people on a mission for the glory of God,
extending the love of Christ to all people,
for the renewal of all things,
amen!**

I Made In His Image

Genesis 1:26-28
2 Corinthians 4:4
Hebrews 1:3

One of the most profound things ever said about human beings is that we are created in God's image.

Read Genesis 1:26-28.

I am still breathless every time I look at these verses. What does the extraordinary gift of the divine image mean?

We would expect the answer to be found right here in these verses. But the passage, while illuminating to a degree, leaves many questions unanswered.

Ultimately, we will see that the fullest meaning of God's image is found by following a circuitous biblical path that leads, in the end, up a hill named Golgotha.

Over the next few weeks, we will slowly climb that hill as a church family. It could be the most significant climb of our lives.

The journey will be transformational, revitalizing our outlook and shaping our lives within and outside the church of Jesus Christ.

Please think through the following questions and look forward to discussing your answers with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

1 Look closely at Genesis 1:26 and make an initial attempt to answer the big question – What does it mean to be ‘created in God’s image?’

2 What answers have you heard others give to the question?

3 Turning the noun ‘image’ into a verb is helpful. What does it mean ‘to image’ something? In particular, what does it mean ‘to image’ God? How does the insight that we were created ‘after God’s likeness’ shed additional light on your answer?

4 The plural self-reference of God is very surprising: ‘Let **us** create man in **our** image’ (Genesis 1:26). What does the plurality of the Godhead suggest about how we reflect God’s image?

5 How does the composition of man as a duality, as ‘male and female’ (Genesis 1:27) help to answer the prior question?

6 What does the command ‘to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’ (Genesis 1:28) suggest about the function and the nature of God’s image?

7 What does the command ‘to subdue and rule over the earth’ (Genesis 1:28) suggest about the function and the nature of God’s image?

8

Other than the few clues we have unearthed in Genesis 1, the rest of the Old Testament does not seem very forthcoming about the meaning of God’s image. Gratefully, the New Testament is more illuminating. It identifies the one who perfectly reflects the divine image. Who is that one? See 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Hebrews 1:3. How do these verses elucidate the meaning of the divine image?

9

In the two passages above, both Paul and the author of Hebrews link the image of God with the glory of God. To be in God’s image is to reflect his glory. What does this revelation add to our understanding of humanity?

10

Gathering up all the insights of your study of Genesis 1:26-28, what does it mean to be human? How does this differ from contemporary notions about being human? How does it change your understanding of your own humanity? Does it make you more or less impressed with your calling as a human being? Explain how you are presently fulfilling that vocation.

II Reflecting the Self-Giving God

Philippians 2:5-8
Genesis 1:26-28

God’s purposes for humanity are funneled into one word: ‘image.’
We are to be images of our Maker.

God’s purposes for humanity are funneled into one word: ‘image.’

We are to be images of our Maker.

This is startling, mind-boggling, thrilling! We are, in some real and profound sense, to reflect God. But what does this look like?

So far we have discovered four critical effects of the divine image. We manifest the image plurally, globally, therapeutically, and gloriously.

But what is the essence of God’s image? And how is it expressed in practice?

To answer these questions – questions essential to understanding both our humanity and the divinity of God – we must turn to Jesus Christ, the perfect expression of the divine image.

Unlike us, Jesus is not created **according** to God’s image. He **is** God’s image. (Colossians 1:15) He is the prototype of which we are the copies.

A great prize awaits anyone who can understand the divine image in Jesus.

Nowhere is this image given sharper definition than in the exalted hymn of Philippians 2:5-8. Here Christ is presented as the image of God. See the expanded translation below:

**Have the same disposition in you that was in Christ Jesus who,
because he existed in the form of God
[a term nearly synonymous with the image of God],
did not regard his lofty status of equality with God
as an opportunity for self-grasping,
but rather as a calling to do just the opposite,
to empty himself,
taking on the form of a slave,
becoming in the likeness of men,
being found in shape as a man,
and to humble himself,
becoming obedient to the point of death,
even the death of a cross.**

Read over those verses several times, thinking about them carefully, and then answer the following questions.

1 For Jesus, existing ‘in the form of God’ meant enjoying a ‘lofty status.’ Describe what you know of his lofty status.

2 How might Jesus have used his lofty status for ‘self-grasping’ – that is, for self-exaltation, self-defense, self-promotion?

3 Why did Jesus refuse all self-grasping? (Clue: notice how we translated the participle in verse 6, not concessively [‘*although* he existed in the form of God’], but causally [‘*because* he existed in the form of God’]).

4 When you read the term ‘self-grasping,’ to what defining event in the Bible do you immediately detect an allusion? (Think Genesis 3). List similarities between the two passages.

5 What does it mean that Jesus ‘emptied himself?’ In other words, of what did he empty himself? Use the context of these verses in Philippians 2 to support your answer.

6 How overwhelming was Jesus’ self-emptying? Explain. (Clue: where was Jesus [geographically] before and after his self-emptying)?

7 Now that you’ve examined the passage, take a step back and, in your own words, describe what it means, using Christ as your prototype, to be in the image of God. What other biblical passages about Christ support your description?

8 Plugging this definition of God’s image back into Genesis 1, what does the gift of the divine image suggest about our ultimate purpose as human beings? (Hint: use the four effects of the divine image in Genesis 1 to fill out your answer).

9 Can you think of any more lofty calling than to be an image-bearer of God? Give examples of how you image God?

III The Sin of Self-Grasping

Genesis 3:1-13
Romans 1:21-23
Colossians 3:5-8

Sadly, reality seldom conforms to the ideal. There is little unity in our world. Fracture, division, and strife tend to be the norm.

There is nothing more wonderful than being image-bearers of God. The Lord has made us to reproduce in our relationships the very glory that pulsates back and forth among members of the Holy Trinity.

As we have learned, it is a glory which finds its fullest expression in the self-emptying of the cross of Christ, in the extravagant outpouring goodness of our Lord.

When we replicate the glory of Christ by pouring ourselves into others, and when through our migrations to the four corners of the planet we fill the earth with mirror-images of his extravagant self-giving goodness, we subdue creation in the most beautiful way imaginable: we subject all things to the unifying power of the outpouring goodness of our Creator!

Sadly, reality seldom conforms to the ideal. There is little unity in our world. Fracture, division, and strife tend to be the norm.

Evidence of the ‘extravagance of self-giving’ is scarce. Egotism and selfishness seem to reign.

What went wrong? Where did humanity take a false turn? And what’s the nature of that turn?

It’s only when we understand the nature of our wrong turn that we can comprehend fully our need of rescue.

The wrong turn is set out clearly in Genesis 3. Read the first seven verses and work through the following questions.

1

After giving human beings access to *all* the trees of the garden, why would God prohibit eating from *one*, the one ‘in the midst of the garden?’ (verse 2)

2

What do you think is the ‘knowledge of good and evil’? Why in God’s eyes does it lead to death? (verses 3-5)

3

Why did Eve eat from the forbidden tree? In other words, what motivated her to consume its fruit? See verse 6.

4

Do you see any correspondence between her sin and ours? If so, what is it?

5

In what sense were the ‘eyes of both . . . opened’? And what is the significance of the discovery of their own nakedness? (verse 7)

6 How does Romans 1:21-23 add further insight to the primal sin of Genesis 3? (Note the literal rendering of Romans 1:21: ‘For although they knew God, they did not **glorify** him as God’).

7 What is the relationship between the plural sins listed in, say, Colossians 3:5-8 and the singular sin of Genesis 3 and Romans 1?

8 How would you describe the difference between sinning and imaging God? What does sin do to the image of God in us? How does sin affect us and our relationships?

IV Election of a New Family

Genesis 12:1-3
Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:6-7
Galatians 3:8, 16, 26-29

In his love, the Lord formulates a plan to rescue us from self-destruction and to re-unite us with himself.

So far we have received a tantalizing glimpse into God’s plan for creation. To sum up, we were created with the unique capacity to reflect God’s glory.

We were made to reproduce in our earthly relationships the sort of glory that marks out relations within the triune Godhead, where Father, Son and Holy Spirit empty themselves selflessly into one another.

Sadly, however, we fall short of this glory. We succumb to an impulse precisely the opposite of that to which we are called: far from being self-giving, we are self-grasping. Or to put it bluntly, we sin.

The sins of self-grasping are too numerous to count. That’s why we call them ‘sins plural’. But every sin derives from a common source, the sinister impulse of ‘sin singular’ – the desire to be our own god, to deify our own wants, to seek first our own satisfaction, and to seek it in our own way and in our own time – in a word, to usurp from God the prerogative of ruling over our lives.

This sin, the singular sin of ‘de-godding’ God, plunges us into a painful darkness. It separates us from God, who is our life, and imprisons us in a wretched godlessness, which is tantamount to eternal death.

Here we ought to remain . . . **but for the matchless grace of God!** In his love, the Lord formulates a plan to rescue us from self-destruction and to re-unite us with himself.

In the Old Testament, The PLAN is rolled out in two steps:

1. God calls out a new family to serve as his image-bearers in the world, and
2. God provides the new family with a set of guidelines for the fulfillment of their calling.

This week we will take a look at the first step – the election of a new family.

1 Read Genesis 12:1-3. Here God calls Abram away from his father's house to form a new family. God promises to do two things for this new family. What are they?

2 Why would God tackle the problem of human sin by forming a new family? (Hint: think back to what we learned about God's purposes for humanity as revealed in the divine image).

3 Pay close attention to the last line of verse 3: 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'. This is an utterly strategic promise – and note how it is repeated in Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14. How do these passages represent a development of The PLAN of Genesis 1 to fill the earth with God's glory?

4 Does the new family of Abraham succeed in its calling to bless 'all the families of the earth'? And do Abraham's successors, the families of Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Saul, David, indeed the chosen family of Israel succeed? Give examples.

5 If your answer to the last question is that the family of Israel failed to provide a blessing to the families of the earth, then what happens to the divine promise that through these families God would bless all other families? Does Israel's failure negate God's promise?

6 Look at two short passages from the prophet Isaiah: 42:1-7 and 49:6-7. In both, we are introduced to a 'servant' who will one day become 'a light to the nations'. This sounds like the call of God to the first family, and subsequently to Abraham's family, to carry the glory of his image to the farthest reaches of the earth. In chapter 42, the servant is identified with the family of Israel (see especially 41:8), but in chapter 49 with an individual. How do we reconcile the apparent inconsistency?

7 Look at Galatians 3:16. What does this verse suggest about the identity of the prophesied 'servant' in Isaiah? What does this verse suggest about the unconditional nature of God's promise to Abraham?

8 But can Christ really fulfill the covenantal promise of Genesis 12? He is but one offspring, while God promised an offspring as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:5) and consisting of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:5). How can Christ be the fulfillment of such a massive promise? See Galatians 3:8.

9 Usually when one party fails to uphold his end of an agreement, the agreement collapses. But not the covenant made with Abraham. The failure of Abraham, and of his successor families, to bless the nations of earth did not dissolve the covenant. Why not?

10 Look at the fulfillment of the covenantal promise in Galatians 3:26-29. What does it suggest about God's faithfulness to his promise? When you fail to glorify God, how does he respond? How does his unconditional grace minister to you?

V Guidelines for the Family of God

Exodus 20:3-17
Deuteronomy 7:9-14
Romans 3:10-20
Galatians 5:14
John 15:13
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Romans 10:4

We human beings were created for God's glory, to showcase by our lives the radiance of his self-giving Person.

Everything is about God's glory!

Especially with us – we human beings were created for God's glory, to showcase by our lives the radiance of his self-giving Person.

Tragically, we are prone to do just the reverse. We indulge in acts of self-grasping (sins plural) in pursuit of our own glory (sin singular). Sin causes our downfall and, as a consequence, all creation groans.

But God, being rich in mercy and wanting to glorify himself in ways beyond anything we could ever imagine, conceives an astonishing plan by which to rescue us from the devastation of sin.

Last week we considered the first step in The PLAN. God elects a new family, the family of Abraham, to be the vehicle of his glory. Through this chosen people, as they exhibit the image of God to the ends of the earth, all nations will be blessed.

This week we look at the second step in The PLAN, the gift of a set of guidelines for the family of God, enabling them to fulfill their sacred calling. It is the gift of the law.

How the law represents a vital ingredient in God's rescue plan is something we must now figure out.

1

Look briefly at the Ten Commandments, the core of God's law, either in Exodus 20 or in Deuteronomy 5, and answer the question: what do the commandments share in common? (Hint: think how each commandment promotes in us the image of God).

2

If the children of God are able to keep the commandments, what supreme good will come to them? See Deuteronomy 7:9-14. How do these verses line up with the message of Genesis?

3

Did the children of God keep his Law? Read Romans 3:10-20. What does Jesus himself imply about our ability to keep the law? See Matthew 5:21-48.

4

The apostle Paul simplifies things by teaching that the entire law – the Ten Commandments and all the other 600 or so statutes – can be summed up in one word. What is that word? See Galatians 5:14 and Romans 13:8-9, and also the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 22:36-40 (note especially verse 40).

5

How is love defined biblically? Look at John 15:13 and 1 John 3:16 (and for further illumination see Luke 10:25-37 and John 13:1-7, 31-35). How does biblical love serve to fulfill the law? Bonus question! – how is biblical love related to the image of God?

6

According to all we've learned so far in the study of The PLAN, why is it difficult – indeed impossible – for human beings to love in a biblical way? What needs to happen for us to love biblically? Does the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 shed any light? How about Ezekiel 36:26-27?

7

How are the prophecies of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 fulfilled? (Hint: look at Matthew 5:17-18 and Romans 10:4).

8

Has the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 been fulfilled within you? What has the Lord done in your heart?

VI Christ in Us . . . the Hope of Glory

Ephesians 1:9-10; 3:9,
11, 14-19
Colossians 1:26-27
2 Corinthians 4:6
John 17:20-26
Ephesians 1:22-23; 3:10

The PLAN, to be realized in the Son of God, is extensive – so much broader than anything even most Christians could imagine.

It is an extraordinary thing to be human.

We have the most exalted privilege of all – to image to our world the glory of God, to reproduce in our earthly relationships the self-giving love that radiates among members of the Holy Trinity!

But we all fall short of God's glory. We pursue our own glory, becoming self-grasping.

Thankfully, God does not tolerate a diminishment of his glory, and conceives a rescue plan for humanity.

He elects a new family (the people of Israel) and establishes a set of guidelines (the law), intending through these two provisions to renew his promise to fill the earth with Trinitarian love.

But The PLAN (as it unfolds in the Old Testament) lacks potency. It cannot effect what it has purposed. Humans do not fill the earth with God's glory.

And God is not surprised. Indeed, by far the biggest part of his plan is still to come.

From time immemorial, God intended to bring his plan to ultimate fulfillment by sending into the world a member of his own Family in order to refashion the world's families. 'In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son' (Galatians 4:4).

The PLAN, to be realized in the Son of God, is extensive – so much broader than anything even most Christians could imagine. It is vital to reckon with its full dimensions.

Let's begin in Ephesians, one of the last of Paul's epistles, where his theological mind is now fully developed and where he describes the outworking of God's epic plan.

1 In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul announces that God has at last ‘made known the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a *plan* for the fullness of time,’ namely, ‘*to unite all things in Christ*, things in heaven and things on earth’ (verses 8-10). Put this in your own words – what does it mean, literally, ‘to sum up all things under one head, namely, Christ?’

2 How do the cosmic dimensions of God’s plan differ from the way Christians usually talk about what God is doing in the world? Give examples. How do they change the way you think about God’s work in this world?

3 Later in Ephesians, Paul makes further disclosures: the plan, hidden for ages in God, is now being realized **in Christ Jesus our Lord** (3:9, 11). The focal-point of The PLAN is Jesus Christ. But in what sense? How is Christ the realization of The PLAN? This is a crucial question. For an answer look at Ephesians 3:14-19 and meditate carefully on its astonishing truths.

4 Paul says something similar in Colossians 1:26-27: ‘the mystery hidden for ages and generations is now being revealed . . . and the riches of the glory of this mystery is Christ in you, the hope of glory’. Describe the revelation in your own words. How does ‘Christ in you’ fulfill ‘the hope of glory?’ (Hint: think about glory as we have come to understand it in the course of our studies together, epitomized by Christ’s self-emptying love).

5 How did Paul personally come to see ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ as the fulfillment of God’s plan? Does 2 Corinthians 4:6 answer the question? Elaborate.

6 In many places, Paul underscores the importance of the indwelling Christ (see Romans 8:10; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 4:19). Can you think of similar emphases in the teachings of Jesus? Look at the last paragraph of the High Priestly Prayer in John 17 and put it in your own words.

7 We must remind ourselves that ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ is not merely an individual attainment, but a corporate experience, a blessing shared simultaneously by many people. Where do we find such a group of people? See Ephesians 1:22-23 and 3:10.

8 Has God’s plan been fulfilled in you? How do you know?

9 Is The PLAN of God being fulfilled in the church? On what evidence may we say that Camelback Bible Church represents a fulfillment of God’s plan?

VII

Hearts Fit for the Indwelling Christ

Romans 1:18-23; 3:23-26
Mark 10:45
Colossians 1:20-22
Philippians 3:9
Romans 5:1-5

Christ, is not only the fulfillment of God's plan, but the means to its fulfillment – the end of God's designs and the means to the end.

For ages the riches of God's plan were veiled in a mystery, hidden to human eyes. But now – amazingly – the riches are revealed to us!

Where? How?

The answer to both questions is . . . in CHRIST!

'In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3), and in Christ is hidden all the radiance of divine glory.

We see this glory in Christ's unequalled expressions of self-emptying love, epitomized by the outpouring of his life on a vile cross.

Not just **a** cross, but **the** cross – the most compelling object in history. Because on **the** cross, the glory of God was restored to us!

Last week we learned that The PLAN of God is fulfilled when Christ comes to dwell in us and renews our hope of glory. With the glory of Christ welling up in our hearts, how can we not discharge our calling to fill the earth with God's glory, the glory of self-giving love?

Yet, because we are self-serving sinners who pursue our own glory, we are entirely unfit to become vessels of divine glory.

Remarkably, God ratchets up the expression of grace by sending his own Son, Jesus Christ, to bear away our sins on the cross and make us fit for his indwelling presence.

Christ, therefore, is not only the fulfillment of God's plan, but the means to its fulfillment – the end of God's designs and the means to the end.

For a close-up view of the atoning work of the cross, journey through the following questions.

1

Read Romans 1:18-23. What is 'the wrath of God?' And why, according to this passage, is God wrathful?

2

Does it seem right to you that God should get angry? Why or why not? Can you back up your answer using the Bible?

3

Obviously, God cannot send Christ to dwell in someone whose sin makes him angry. And he cannot rightly dismiss his anger unless he can erase the reason for his anger. Sadly, we are the reason for his anger: 'we have all sinned' (Romans 3:23). So to be able rightly to appease his anger, God would have to turn his back on us. But that puts his plan for creation in peril, since we are the agents in the fulfillment of that plan, insofar as we manifest his glory around the world. Because of our sin, we 'fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23).

So what is God to do? Cut his losses and be done with the business of humanity? Or perhaps redeem humanity? For the undeserved answer read Romans 3:23-26.

4 What does it mean in Romans 3:24-25 when Paul says that God put forward Jesus Christ as a propitiation by his blood? In other words, what does it mean to be a propitiation? And who's being propitiated? For what? Do your answers to these questions elevate or diminish your esteem of God?

5 In the gospel of Mark, Jesus foretells his own suffering. He says he must suffer (Mark 8:31; 9:31) and give up his life a ransom for many (10:45). What does it mean to become a ransom? And how will the suffering of Christ serve as our ransom?

6 Paul gives great emphasis on being reconciled to God, something that can only happen, Paul says, 'by the blood of the cross' (Colossians 1:20-22). What does it mean to be reconciled to God? Why do we need reconciliation? How is it achieved?

7 Everywhere in Paul, we are encouraged to appropriate this reconciliation, redemption, justification . . . by faith. See Romans 3:25; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 3:9. Jesus also extols faith (Matthew 8:5, 26; 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; 17:20, etc.). What is faith? Sometimes it's helpful to define a word by what it's not – what is faith not? Do you have faith? If so, how did you get it? And what is the object of your faith?

8 In order for Christ to dwell in our hearts, we must have hearts that are justified by faith and reconciled to God. Romans 5 brings these two vital themes together: a heart indwelt – 'God pours his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (verse 5) – and a heart justified – 'we have been justified by faith and have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 2). To top it off, listen to the magnificent truth: 'Through Christ we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God' (verse 2).

This truth set the sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther free from the bondage of spiritual exhaustion. Have you been so liberated? Are you rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God? Explain, using insights from this study, the nature of the glory which causes your rejoicing.

VIII Transformation into Christ's Image

Ephesians 4:20-24
Colossians 3:9-10
2 Corinthians 3:18
Colossians 1:28
Jeremiah 31:33
Mark 10:45

The capacity to reflect God's image is being renewed, and the possibility of fulfilling God's plan is being recovered – all because of Christ in us, accomplishing in us what we are unable to do by ourselves.

With hearts now justified and cleansed, and habitable for Christ, we become completely new creatures.

‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come’ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Naturally, we want to know how we've become new, and exactly what has passed away and what has come.

Paul satisfies our curiosity: ‘Christ died so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died and rose for them’ (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Thus a complete reversal occurs in people indwelt by Christ – no longer self-grasping, they become self-giving; no longer living for themselves, they live for Christ and others.

This is precisely what we should expect from those in whom Christ is operating: hearts supernaturally molded into conformity with the self-emptying Christ.

The language Paul uses to describe this transformation will strike a familiar chord for everyone who has engaged with this study. It's a revival of the language of Genesis 1, with emphasis on the word ‘image’.

Listen to Paul: ‘we have put on the new man, which is being renewed **according to the image of its creator**’ (Colossians 3:10).

What an epiphany!

Our capacity to reflect God's image is being renewed, and the possibility of fulfilling God's plan is being recovered – all because of Christ in us, accomplishing in us what we are unable to do by ourselves.

For the extraordinary reality of who you are in Christ, dive into the following passages and questions.

1 In Ephesians 4:20-24 and Colossians 3:9-10, we are told that we can take off the old man and put on the new man. What – or who – is the old and the new man? For a clue see Romans 13:14.

2 In Ephesians 4, we are commanded to put on the new man, whereas in Colossians 3 we are informed that, as Christians, we have already put him on. This is confusing. Have we, or haven't we, put on the new man? How do we reconcile between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ in Ephesians and Colossians?

3 Read carefully 2 Corinthians 3:18. Note in particular the use of the words ‘image’ and ‘transformed,’ the latter denoting a progressive, ongoing transformation. How does this verse help to answer the prior question of whether we have ‘already’ or ‘not yet’ put on the new man?

4 Paul sums up the thrust of his ministry in this way: ‘We proclaim Christ, in order to present every person complete (teleios) in Christ’ (Colossians 1:28). What does it mean to be ‘complete in Christ’? (Clue: reflect on your understanding of how the indwelling Christ is renewing in you the image of God).

5 Thinking very practically, when you are transformed into the image of the Lord how does it change the way you live? For potential answers, see Colossians 3:12-17. How might Ephesians 5:2 sum up your answer? What evidence is there in your life – at home and at work – of Christ dwelling in you?

6 How has the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:33 been fulfilled through Christ? How has it been fulfilled in you?

7 How did Jesus, in his teaching ministry, describe the renewal of God’s image in us? See Mark 10:35-45 (especially verses 42-45). How do you see yourself living out the teaching of Jesus?

IX

The Family at the Center of The PLAN

Ephesians 4:7-16
1 Corinthians 12:1-20
Ephesians 3:10, 20-21

It's time to see what happens when an entire family – in particular the church of Jesus Christ – is reconstituted for the purpose of radiating the divine image.

Never has there been a plan like God's plan – so big, beneficial, and beautiful!

Almighty God, awe-inspiring Creator, holy Lord . . . making human beings in his image, so that they might know the supreme joy of glorifying him by reproducing his self-giving love.

We have seen – to our amazement – how God works that plan within us, restoring to us the possibility of 'imaging' his glory in the world. He cleanses our hearts and then fills them with the Spirit of Christ, who refashions us progressively in accordance with his own cruciform love, equipping us for the joy-filled life.

But that's only part of the picture. Not only does God write the law of his love on our hearts, but he also provides a context in which to express that love.

Such a context could only be a family – a family which mirrors, reflects, images the triune Family.

It's time to see what happens when an entire family – in particular the church of Christ – is reconstituted for the purpose of radiating the divine image.

It's a sight to behold!

And that's precisely God's plan. He wants the whole world to **see**, through the church of Jesus Christ, the glory of inter-Trinitarian love.

'To him be glory **in the church!**' (Ephesians 3:21)

Let's catch an eyeful of the **The PLAN** by looking at the biblical vision of the local church.

1 Love is the sine qua non of the church of Jesus Christ. Not a sentimental love, but the supernatural love of laying down one's life in order to pick up another's (see Luke 10:25-37). It's worth canvassing the testimony of Scripture on the centrality of love, beginning with Paul: 'Put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony' (Colossians 3:4); 'Owe nothing to one another except to love each other, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law' (Romans 13:8); 'So now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love' (1 Corinthians 13:13); 'Through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word; "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"' (Galatians 5:13-14); 'Walk in love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2); 'It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more' (Philippians 1:9); 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another' (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

The ultimacy of love features prominently as well in the writings of John: 'This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another' (1 John 3:11); 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God' (1 John 4:7).

So, too, in the apostle Peter: 'Above all, keep on loving one another' (1 Peter 4:7).

The primacy of love finds its source in the words of Jesus himself: 'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

Now two critical questions: Why is love so vital to The PLAN of God? And why is the context for this love initially the family of Christ, the local church?

2 How is this love expressed within the local church? What role do 'spiritual gifts' play in its expression?

3 According to Ephesians 4:7, how substantial are spiritual gifts? And according to 1 Corinthians 12:18, how strategic are spiritual gifts?

4 What is (are) your spiritual gift(s)? For possibilities, see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Romans 12:6-8; and Ephesians 4:11.

5 What do you do with your spiritual gifts?

6 What happens in a local church when spiritual gifts are given away, passed back and forth among members of the local church? (Hint: look at Ephesians 4:13-16 and put the passage into your own words).

7 We learned earlier that God is unifying all things under the headship of Christ (Ephesians 1:10), a comprehensive unification taking place ultimately in the local church (Ephesians 1:22). What is the nature of this 'unity'? Why is it so important?

8 According to all we've learned about The PLAN of God, by which he is reclaiming all things for his glory, explain in your own words Ephesians 3:10. How do the insights of Ephesians 3:20-21 add to your explanation?

9 What position does the local church occupy in The PLAN of God? What place does the local church occupy in your plans?

10 As a follower of The PLAN of God, what are your burdens and hopes for the local church? How are you helping to make that vision a reality?

X The Final Fulfillment

Romans 8:29
2 Corinthians 3:18
Philippians 3:20-21
1 John 3:2-3
1 Corinthians 15:24-28
Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25
Revelation 21:1-6, 24-27; 22:1-5

We have enough glory now to cause us to yearn with all our hearts for the final installment, when we will be fully like Christ.

What makes Christianity so attractive is that it is so attractive!

In a world worn out by the impulse of self-grasping, resulting in incessant conflict and withering despair, a world diminished by a sense of purposelessness and lacking a plan capable of wresting it from its gloom – in a world like this, The PLAN of God ought to appear incredibly attractive, as the most refreshing spring to parched souls.

Nothing makes more sense of our troubled lives and nothing offers a more complete salvation than . . . The PLAN!

But an important caveat: The PLAN of God has not yet been fully implemented. It has not been consummated.

Evidence of this ‘shortfall’ is everywhere.

Although individual Christians are now, because of the indwelling Christ, the opposite of what they once were – self-giving instead of self-grasping – they are not yet fully what they will be.

Nor is the community of Christians called the local church everything it will be. It is still plagued by outbreaks of rancor and division, indeed sin.

But – and this is as crucial as it is uplifting – we already have the first fruits of what will come, the down payment on a priceless inheritance. We have enough glory now to cause us to yearn with all our hearts for the final installment.

On the final day, when at last we will be complete, we will be filled with all the fullness of God and we will be perfect images of the undiluted glory of Jesus Christ.

Let’s pull back the curtain on this ultimate glory, using these questions.

1

Perhaps nowhere is The PLAN articulated more clearly than in Romans 8:29: ‘Those whom he (God) foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the image of his Son**, in order that he (the Son) might be the firstborn among many brothers.’ In your own words, what does it mean to be conformed to the image of Christ? And what does it mean to be the ‘firstborn among many brothers?’

2

The process of being transformed into the image of our Lord has begun for everyone who has put his or her trust in Jesus Christ. See 2 Corinthians 3:18. But according to this verse, we have farther to go. What do we still lack? And how will we get it? Will it be through something we do? Or something God does? Or both?

3

When will the process be complete? See Philippians 3:20-21 and 1 John 3:2-3. According to these verses, what will we be like at the end of the process?

4 Paul says he ‘waits eagerly’ for the consummation (Philippians 3:20). Jesus teaches us, in many places, that we should long for his return (Matthew 25:1-13). Do you long for the day when you see Christ, when you will, in an instant, be fully like him?

5 In the end Christ will ‘deliver the kingdom to God the Father’ (1 Corinthians 15:24). What do you think this means? In other words, what remains to be delivered to God that wasn’t already delivered at the cross and resurrection of Christ? (Hint: look at the fuller context of this verse, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

6 What will the kingdom of heaven be like? Look at Isaiah 11:6-9; 65:17-25; and Revelation 21:1-6, 24-27; 22:1-5. How do the insights and images of these passages represent the culmination of God’s plan as we have come to understand it?

7 After ten weeks of luxuriating in the beauty of God’s plan, what impressions stand out most prominently in your mind and heart?

8 How does a better understanding of God’s plan change your plans for your life?

9 How does the power of Christ within you transform your outlook at work, your demeanor in the home, your involvement in the neighborhood, your commitment to your church? As you answer this four-part question, be sure to give personal details.

Further Reading

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Savage, Timothy. *The Church: God's New People*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.

Stott, John. *Basic Christianity*. IVP Books, (November 30, 2006).

Notes
