

# Mission as the Key to Unlocking the Grand Story of the Bible

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For those of us who study the details of Scripture, it can sometimes be easy to forget the Bible is one grand narrative. In his book *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (IVP, 2006) biblical scholar Christopher J. H. Wright offers a marvellous image to speak of the way we must read the biblical story: *mission* is the key that unlocks this grand story.

## *God's Mission*

The Bible tells the story of God's mission to restore the whole world. Against the backdrop of a good creation and sinful humanity's pollution of that world with an act of brazen rebellion, in love God sets out on a long journey to restore the creation to what he intended from the beginning.

This is a story of *universal history*. The biblical story begins with the origin of all things and moves to the goal of all history. It is nothing less than the true story of the whole world.

It is, moreover, a story that is first and foremost a narrative of *God's activity*. It tells us what God is doing to heal and liberate his creation.

The goal of God's activity is the restoration of all of human life in the context of the whole creation. Some mistakenly think that God's purpose is to save human individual souls to live in a spiritual heaven. Rather, it is to restore the fullness of human life in resurrected bodies on a creation freed from the power and consequences of human rebellion. Salvation is comprehensive: all of human life and all of the non-human creation will be restored.

## *Israel's Mission*

God's mission is carried out *in and through a people*. Two texts are especially noteworthy in the telling of the story of Israel's mission: Genesis 12:1-3 and Exodus 19:3-6.

The first two chapters of the Bible show us God's original design for his creation. Genesis 3-11 tells the tragic story of humanity's rebellion and of its escalating and devastating effect. In this ominous darkness, God chooses Abraham to be a light. God makes a twofold promise: he will make Abraham into a great nation and restore to that nation the blessing of God's good creation; and through that nation God will bring blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:2-3). From the beginning God's people are chosen and blessed *to be a blessing*.

In the book of Exodus God forms that nation to fulfill its purpose. He liberates them from bondage to Egyptian idolatry and brings them to Mount Sinai. There God calls them to be a holy nation and a priestly kingdom (Ex. 19:3-6). A priest mediates God's blessing to others. They mediate blessing as a holy nation—a people who are on display before the nations, demonstrating what it means to live the way God designed human life.

Upon the heels of this call God gives Israel the Torah, a pattern of what a holy nation looks like in that context (Ex. 20-23). First, Israel's life is oriented backward: Israel is to be a picture of God's creational intention for human life. Second, Israel's life is oriented forward: Israel is to be a sign and preview of God's final destination for all history. Third, Israel's life is oriented outward: they are to encounter the idolatry that shapes all other nations. The law directs Israel in the way of life, and calls them to reject the death-dealing path of idolatry. As Israel lives this way, they will offer an attractive alternative and invite the nations into covenant with God.

The remainder of the Old Testament is a commentary on just how well Israel lives up to their vocation. Instead of being a light to the nations, Israel continues to be engulfed by the darkness of idolatry. God acts in mercy and judgment to restore them to their calling. He gives them what they need to fulfill their task—including the law, a sacrificial system, priests, a temple, kings, and prophets. But it all ends in disaster when Israel is judged and banished from the land.

At this point the prophets enter the drama. They proclaim that Israel is being judged for their sin, but that there will come a time when their sin is paid for (Isa. 40:1-2) and they will be gathered and renewed to fulfill their calling (Ezek. 36:22-32). Then peoples from all nations will enjoy the blessing of God's restoration. This will be the climax of God's story—when his kingdom is finally restored through an anointed king in David's line and by the power of God's Spirit (Joel 2).

And so for centuries Israel lives in fervent hope that the time will come when God will gather and restore them to their calling so he can complete his work.

### *Jesus' Mission*

Jesus steps onto the stage of cosmic history and announces that the promised day has come: the kingdom of God has arrived (Mark 1:14-15). He is God's anointed king, and the Spirit is on him to deliver the creation from the power of evil (Luke 4:16-18). Surely now is the time for God's universal purposes to be realized. Yet Jesus says that he is sent only to gather the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24). Can this be God's King who will rule the whole earth?

The gospels tell us the story of Jesus' attempt to gather all of Israel so that he might restore them to their calling of bringing blessing to the nations. He proclaims the good news, demonstrates the power of God's renewing work in mighty deeds that picture his new world, and invites faith and repentance.

Only a small number respond, and Jesus gathers them into a small community and begins to teach them a way of life. Jesus invites his newly gathered Israel to be a picture of God's original creational design, to be a preview of the end-time kingdom, and to encounter the idolatry not only in the pagan nations but right in Israel's very own life.

The prophets made it clear that Israel's sin must be paid for before renewal could take place. Jesus takes on this role. His goal is to gather Israel beneath his wings as a mother hen gathers its chicks (Matt. 23:37). Here is a vivid picture: just as a mother hen spreads her wings to protect her chicks from the full force of a barnyard fire, at the cross Jesus spreads his wings and experiences the full

brunt of God's burning wrath so that Israel can be renewed and restored to fulfill their calling. The good news is that at the cross Jesus takes not only Israel's rebellion but the sin of the whole world (John 1:29).

Jesus' resurrection signals a new day: God's new world dawns. With the power and guilt of sin in the old age defeated, and the renewing power of the age to come now present, Jesus summons gathered Israel. He sends them out to take up their task to live among the nations as a model and picture of what God intends (Matt. 28:18-20).

### *The Church's Mission*

Before that mission begins, God breathes out his Spirit to give Israel new life. The Spirit is God's end-time power to renew the face of the earth. At Pentecost (Acts 2) the Spirit gives the freshly gathered community a foretaste of the coming salvation, making them a preview of what human life is intended to be. They are sent in the power of the Spirit to make known the good news.

The New Testament tells the story of Israel's mission to the nations. Before the first century ends they are a multi-ethnic, non-geographical community who enjoy the blessing of God's end-time salvation. This community called "church" lives as part of the story begun in the Old Testament. They are incorporated into the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3; Gal. 3:8) and so are blessed to be a blessing to all peoples. They are given the same task as Israel (Ex. 19:3-6; 1 Pet. 2:9-12).

Yet this community is something new. They are made up of all nations and no longer live together as a political community on one geographical territory. More importantly, they are a people of the *new covenant* liberated from their sin with the gifts of a new heart and the Spirit (Jer. 31:31-34). This new community is empowered for their mission.

This community is a people who gather to nurture this new life through the Word, prayer, fellowship, and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:42). Thus, they manifest an attractive way of life to which others are drawn (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35). They witness to the good news in their lives, words, and deeds as they are scattered throughout the empire.

The book of Acts tells the first chapter of the story of the church's mission to the ends of the earth. And that mission continues today wherever the church is found. The church is called in each context to be a picture of God's final restoration. The church is sent into business and art, sports and entertainment, scholarship and politics with the good news that God is restoring it all. Yet challenging idols is a painful calling, and the church will often suffer. So it must carry out its mission as a community rooted in a vibrant corporate and individual spirituality. But there is a promise: Christ will use the faithfulness of the church for his mission, and one day will complete the work he has begun. He will make all things new!