

RELEASE: TURNING POINTS AND DESTINATIONS ON THE WAY TO FREEDOM IN THE BIBLE STORY

**A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR GOD'S UNFOLDING
STORY OF FREEDOM**

By Ross Farley

Release
God's unfolding story of freedom



TEARAUSTRALIA

Release: Turning points and destinations on the way to freedom in the Bible story

Ross Farley

August 2017

The kite soared high and free, enjoying untroubled mobility in the wind. Life was great and all needs were met. One day the kite began to think about the string that tied it to someone far below. "If it was not for that string, I could fly even higher and anywhere I wanted. The string is restricting me; I must get free of the string." In the next strong gust of wind, the kite pulled free and broke the string. A few seconds later the kite was a broken mess on the ground unable to fly or even move. All freedom was gone.

What is freedom? Many are deceived by the illusion that freedom is to be free from all rule and accountability. Bob Dylan sang...

"But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody"

Freedom is not autonomy. Human beings were made to serve and if we don't serve God, we will serve false gods like money, power, pleasure or some ideology. Just as the kite needs string, so human beings are only truly free under the rule of God. The Bible story both begins and ends with human beings who are totally free and living under the rule of God.

Freedom lost

Humans were created free in an idyllic world and lived in harmony with God, nature and each other. Like the kite breaking its string, humans broke away from the rule of God. The story of eating forbidden fruit is well known but the name of the tree is *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. Humans were given a simple test. God had given them everything they needed and there was no reason to not trust or believe God yet humans decided that they knew good and evil better than God. It was not a

simple mistake but choice to reject God's rule. As a result, everything was ruined. Freedom was replaced by guilt and shame. Relationships were broken –with God, each other and the environment. Humans hid from God, were ashamed of their own bodies, blamed each other, introduced to pain and death and work became toil and subject to failure and futility. They were expelled from Eden and cherubim with a flaming sword guarded the way back to the tree of life. There is no way back to paradise. Humans can only find freedom and regain paradise, not by going back, but by moving forward through death and resurrection to the new earth of promise. We will eat the fruit of the tree of life and the nations will experience its healing power; but not until the last chapter of Revelation.

Human behavior quickly deteriorated and by the fourth chapter of the Bible a man was murdered by his own brother. Evil behavior escalated and God expressed regret that he had made humans. (Gen 6:6) It quickly became evident that human beings were in bondage to their own sinfulness resulting in domination and exploitation of others; personal guilt, shame and fear; and the judgement of God. By the end of Genesis, extremes of nature by flood and famine had killed many and seriously constrained the lives of survivors; people had begun to buy and sell slaves, imprison the innocent and use sex to control and demean.

Seeds of freedom and hope

Genesis also offers hope for a better future. God made a covenant (Ge 12) with the geriatric, childless Abram (later renamed Abraham) to make him a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and bless all the peoples on earth through him. (Many have observed that the entire Bible story is the unfolding fulfillment of these promises.) Despite seemingly impossible odds, Abraham believed God. Abraham's wife was past child bearing age but she had a son. His son and grandson also had difficulty having children yet Abraham's descendants became the nation of Israel and Exodus begins with Israel in slavery in Egypt. The Israelites were hated, politically oppressed, economically exploited, worked excessively and treated cruelly and the King of Egypt

decreed that all Israelite baby boys were to be killed at birth. The promises to Abraham were not looking hopeful.

In a burning bush God spoke to an Israelite refugee named Moses who had fled Egypt: “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ---And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3: 7-10) The God who identified himself to Moses as “I AM” - the self-existent, eternal, and sovereign God -spoke out of a burning bush that symbolized his infinite and unlimited energy that is never consumed, and said, “I have seen the misery of my people. ---I have heard them crying out. --- I am concerned about their suffering. --- I have come down to rescue them. --- I am sending you.” Moses was sent back to Egypt and led the Israelites out of slavery and bondage. The Exodus story is well known: the breaking of the power of Egypt and the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea – but the language of this passage and of the later Old Testament prophets makes clear that, while Moses played an important role, it was God who rescued them.

National freedom

Israel was free from Egypt and slavery. The plan was to move to the promised-land quite quickly but Israelite disobedience prevented that so they wandered as nomads in the wilderness for forty years. They had become a nation but one without a home. Their existence was in harsh conditions. While Israel was not subject to other nations, they only survived through God’s miraculous provision. It was freedom of a sort but not what they wanted nor the sustainable lifestyle God wanted for them.

At Mount Sinai, God made a covenant with Israel and gave them the law. The most well-known section of the law is the Ten Commandments but the most important part

is often left out when they are quoted. God began with “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”. (Ex 20:2) God rescued Israel from Egypt and made them his people before he gave them the law. God did not expect them to obey the law as a means of gaining God’s approval and earning his act of rescue. God saved them from Egypt as they were and accepted them as his people and then told them how he wanted his people to behave by giving them the law. God did not free Israel from slavery in Egypt to make them slaves of the law. They came to the law as free and accepted people. The law was never intended to be a series of boxes that need to be ticked in order to earn God’s acceptance. They were to obey the law because God had accepted them not to gain God’s acceptance.

The law taught Israel how they could honor God and treat each other justly, fairly and respectfully. It included special provisions for the disadvantaged: widows, orphans and aliens. Space does not permit a detailed treatment of the Old Testament laws but you can read them for yourself in the first five Bible books. However an idea of the spirit of the law can be gained by exploring the special years. Consider what would happen in the lives of the Israelites over the years under the Old Testament law.

- Every week they were to have a day of rest (Sabbath), and give their animals, servants and other staff a day of rest – a day to be with their families and dedicated to God (Ex 20:10). The Israelites were trained in this pattern by the manna in the desert (Ex 16:27) and it became such an important sign of the relationship between the people and God that working on the Sabbath carried severe penalties (Ex 31:13-14).
- Every year they were to give a tenth of their income. (Dt 14:22ff) This was given to the Levites and funded the operation of the temple, numerous social functions and was used to meet the needs of the poor.
- Every seven years they cancelled all debts and had a Sabbatical year. (Ex 23:10ff, Lev 25:2ff, Dt 15:1ff) The land was not to be farmed so that the people, animals and land could recover. The Israelites were not to organize a harvest but they could eat what grew naturally. They were also to allow the poor and wild animals to enter their fields and eat what grew. On this year all debts were to be cancelled so everyone could have a financial fresh start.

- Every 50 years (after seven sets of seven years) there was the Year of Jubilee. (Lev 25:8ff) In the Jubilee year, all land was returned to its original tribal family. When Israel entered the land, the property was divided between the Israelite tribes and then between the families. Land could be bought and sold but in the 50th year all land returned to its original tribal family owners. When land was traded, what was really being sold was the number of harvests. The land could not be permanently sold. The point is that land really belongs to God and we are just stewards of God's resources. In Leviticus 25:23 God says, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants." The Jubilee year was a reminder God is the real owner of property. The Jubilee also meant that those who had done it tough, and had lost their property, regained their ancestral land. Families could also only permanently own a limited amount of land.

The Old Testament law required that a range of responses would take place at periodic intervals that would remind the Israelites of their relationship with God and address the needs of the community and the poor. Those responses include giving, lending, canceling debt and land reform. Israelites were not to be bought or sold as slaves (Lev 25:39ff) and, if they became poor, other Israelites were to help them. They were to lend to the poor and not take interest or sell food to the poor at a profit. (Lev 25:35ff) Old Testament faith went hand in hand with social justice. Like the string on the kite, God's rule through his revealed truth should have allowed the Israelites to live in freedom. It would not have been utopia but those who prospered would have assisted those who had been disadvantaged by life's circumstances so all could live in a dignified and sustainable manner. When the Israelites departed from Old Testament faith and turned to idolatry, injustice thrived. It's no coincidence that the Old Testament prophets who preached against idolatry also preached against social injustice.

Seeds of exile

Israel crossed the Jordan River and began to take possession of the Promised Land. At last they would be a free people in their own land. The first city they captured was

Jericho and some of the dynamics in the story of the fall of Adam and Eve were repeated. Adam and Eve were told not to take certain fruit but they took the fruit and hid from God in their shame. The Israelites were told not to take from Jericho certain things that were to be devoted to God but Achan took forbidden articles and hid them to cover his shame. (Joshua 6 and 7) The story demonstrates that, though Israel were God's chosen people and were entering the land of promise, they were still a fallen people in solidarity with fallen humanity. Israel was freed from slavery and given a fresh start in a new land but stumbled at the first hurdle and, though they had strengths and successes, they continued to stumble all through the Old Testament story.

In Egypt, Israel had been oppressed by a foreign nation. In the Promised Land, while they faced threats of foreign invasion, oppression and loss of liberty often came from within. The Old Testament law had specific instructions for Israel's kings which they largely ignored. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 says...

“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” be sure to appoint over you a king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your fellow Israelites. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not an Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.”

By the reign of Solomon, these laws were completely disregarded. God's promises to Abraham reached the peak of their Old Testament fulfillment under Solomon's rule: in the wake of David's victories, Israel had become a great and wealthy nation but Solomon used the opportunity to indulge himself. Compare the following account of Solomon's lifestyle from 1 Kings 11, with the laws for kings in Deuteronomy 17.

"All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's days. The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons. King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. --- Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills. Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Kue". (1 Kings 10:21-28) --- "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter— Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done". (1 Kings 11:1-6)

The writer of 1 Kings recorded point for point how Solomon disobeyed Deuteronomy 17. Despite Solomon's God-given wisdom he became very wicked and his lavish lifestyle and projects had to be paid for at the expense of the Israelite people. Solomon conscripted 30,000 Israelites into forced labor (1 Kings 5:13) contrary to the

law and he imposed excessive taxation. (1 Kings 4:7; 22-23) Solomon imposed such a heavy burden on the people that the ten northern tribes rebelled after his death and seceded. Thus Israel was divided into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The northern kingdom was eventually invaded and lost its identity through assimilation with other nations. Solomon's reign was a turning point. Solomon took Israel to its economic peak but also sowed the seeds of Israel's destruction. After the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, the remainder of the Old Testament story is focused on the kingdom of Judah.

Over the centuries there were good kings and bad kings but the overall story is one of decline and God raised up prophets to call the people to repentance. The writings of 16 of these prophets are recorded in the Old Testament. As a snapshot we will consider just one prophet, Micah: the conditions he faced and his response.

Micah lived in Judah in 8th Century BC in a time of increasing wealth, accompanied by the usual greed, corruption, injustice and immorality. The merchants, officials and upper classes profited at the expense of the general population from wealth produced through dishonest business practices and corrupt courts and officials. Micah was particularly concerned about the small farmers and may well have been a small farmer himself. The merchants, judges and officials conspired together to force farmers into debt and out of business. They would then seize the farmers' possessions, houses and land and possibly force them into a form of slavery. (2:1-3, 9) Because the rich had money and power, they did what they liked and cared nothing for the welfare of others.

Micah cites many examples of the injustice that was rife in Judah...

- Exploitation. The political leaders despised justice and used their positions to exploit people for their own benefit. (3:1-3)
- Bribes. The decisions of rulers, judges and religious leaders were decided by bribes to favor the rich over the poor. (3:11; 7:2-3) Criminals paid judges for protection.

- Crooked business methods. Merchants rigged their scales and measures so that they could overcharge when selling and underpay when buying. (6:10-12)
Wealth came through lies and trickery.
- Robbery and violence. (2:8; 7:2) Innocent passers-by were regularly robbed.
- Fear. No-one could trust anyone, dishonesty and corruption was so rife. (7:5-6)
- Selective hearing. They would not listen to God's prophets but only to preachers who told them what they wanted to hear. (2:10, 11; 3:5, 9)
- False security. They believed God would always protect them because they had the temple and observed their religious practices. (3:9-11)

Israel's response was to solve the problem of injustice with religion; so the people asked, "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?" All sorts of religious offerings and sacrifices are suggested. They start with sacrifices of calves, then thousands of rams, then 10,000 rivers of olive oil, and finally they suggest child sacrifice.

- Offering calves is consistent with OT offerings but the bids quickly escalate to ridiculous levels.
- Thousands of rams: how many could afford that?
- 10,000 rivers (not bottles) of olive oil? How could anyone find that much olive oil let alone get it to the temple?
- Child sacrifice? Other religions did that. Why not offer my child?

All these crazy suggestions betray a mindset. This was a money-mad, corrupt society where paying the right price to the right person would get what you want. They were used to dealing with crime by bribing judges. Everyone has their price, so why not God? Their sin was great so offering great sacrifices might do the trick. All they had to do was find the right price and they could buy God off –or so they thought.

However there is another more common, mindset here: when people resolve to take God more seriously, they often increase their religious activity. In the 21st Century they decide to read the Bible more; go to church more; pray more; get baptized; take

communion; give more. The way to please God must be to do more religious stuff but that is not fundamentally what God wants.

There is nothing we can do to remove our sin. Can I offer my child for “the sin of my soul”? No you can’t! And it would not secure your forgiveness anyway! Ironically God offered his Son for the sins of our souls. Religion does not save but God saves through Jesus!

What does God want? Micah 6:8 says, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” God does not want our religious activity; God wants us! God wants us to give up all ideas that we can make ourselves acceptable to God. God wants us to repent; to give our lives to God and walk humbly before him. God then wants us to treat others with justice and mercy.

Other prophets also called on the people of Israel to repent and warned of coming destruction if they failed to do so. That is the nature of prophecy. Old Testament prophets were not dreamers who predicted the future for the sake of it. They were preachers addressing the issues of their own day, who pointed to what God wanted and predicted the consequences that would result if people obeyed or disobeyed. If people obeyed God and lived justly, life would go well because they would create for themselves a good society for all and God would bless and protect them. If they disobeyed and continued to rebel against God and promote social injustice, their society would decay from within; they would become a weaker nation and ripe for invasion. It was in that context that many of the prophets predicted that Judah (all that remained of Israel) would be invaded by a powerful nation and exiled in a foreign land for 70 years.

The prediction of exile was fulfilled in 605BC when Babylon, under Nebuchadnezzar, conquered Israel. (2 Kings 25) Ancient armies could not move quickly like modern armies so to keep Israel under control and avoid the expense of leaving a large occupying army permanently in Israel, the Babylonians identified anyone who had the

capacity and influence to lead a resistance and exiled them to Babylon. This meant that all the political, economic and religious leaders of Israel were sent to Babylon to live out their days. In 587 BC Babylon destroyed the temple bringing a halt to temple worship and, through a series of events; Jerusalem was destroyed including its major buildings and city walls, leaving it defenseless. Jerusalem was abandoned and remained virtually uninhabited for 142 years.

The Old Testament prophets had preached that God would judge Israel with invasion, destruction and exile. However this judgment was not merely judicial but was also a natural consequence of Israel's own behavior. Social injustice supported by false religion had eroded the fabric of society making them a weaker nation. Their foreign policies, where they trusted in political alliances rather than God, increased their vulnerability to the very nations who could destroy them. (E.g. Isaiah 39)

There are also some ironies in the exile. Though God used Babylon to punish Israel, God also punished Babylon (with invasion by Persia) for the harsh way they treated Israel in the Babylonian invasion and exile. (Isaiah 47. Especially vv.1, 5-7, 9) There were no good nations in this story. They all did wrong and faced consequences. However, while exile meant slavery in Babylon for the Jews, it was a Sabbath rest for the land of Israel. In the concluding comments of 2 Chronicles the following is stated, "He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah". (2 Chronicles 36:20-21) Israel should have had a Sabbatical year every seven years to allow the land to lie fallow and recover. It is a matter of debate how often, if ever, the people of Israel did this. This verse suggests that God used the exile to give the land an extended Sabbatical rest to make up for all the Sabbatical years that should have been observed but weren't. The land was allowed to lie fallow for about 70 years to recover from centuries of agricultural depletion.

Freedom from exile

In 539BC Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon. Persia was now the world super-power making Cyrus the ruler of the Jews as well as numerous other nations. In 538BC Cyrus issued a decree (recorded in Ezra 1:1-4), that freed the Jews and called on them to return to Israel. Isaiah and Jeremiah had previously prophesied that Cyrus would free the Jews, restore Israel, and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. (2 Ch 36:22,23; Isa 44:28; 45:1,13; Jer 25:11-12; 29:10-14) Cyrus had become aware of these prophecies and “the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia”. (Ezra 1:1) Because these prophecies had been made about him, Cyrus believed that he should do what God wanted. Cyrus’ decree stated that...

- God had appointed him to rebuild the temple.
- The Jews were given permission to return to Israel.
- The gentile neighbors of the Jews were commanded to give them silver, gold, animals and offerings for the temple.

The rest of the book of Ezra is the account of how, what Cyrus decreed, came to pass. Isaiah and Jeremiah’s prophecies about Cyrus literally became self-fulfilling prophecies. In 538BC the first caravan of exiles returned to Israel to a land in ruins where there was no temple and the religious, government and economic systems were in tatters. They set up an altar in the temple ruins which were in the ruins of Jerusalem and regular sacrifices began. In 537BC the Jews began to rebuild the temple and the young rejoiced while the old people, who remembered the former temple, wept because, even at this early stage, it was obviously going to be inferior. (Ezra 3) However the neighboring nations opposed the work and it came to a stop and the temple sat in ruins for a further 17 years. It is easy for us to underestimate the importance of the temple for OT believers. It was not the same as a church building – a convenient place for religious services. The temple was the dwelling place of God to Old Testament believers. While it was in ruins, God’s presence was not with them and many important aspects of their worship could not function. If they were to experience the presence of God, the temple must be rebuilt. It was with these convictions that Haggai and Zechariah preached and motivated the Jews to rebuild the temple. With the assistance of foreign aid from the Persian government, the temple was completed and dedicated in 515BC.

Even though the temple had been rebuilt, Jerusalem was still in ruins. No houses had been rebuilt, very few people lived there and the walls were still broken so the city was unable to be defended. Jerusalem would never function as a capital city until the walls had been rebuilt. Nehemiah was cup-bearer to King Ar-ta-Xerxes and he asked permission to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In 445BC, Nehemiah organized the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days¹ and remained as governor of Jerusalem for 12 years. Ten percent of the population moved from rural areas into Jerusalem so that it was rebuilt, repopulated and became a functioning capital city once again. A lot of nation building was also required to restore the political, economic, religious and moral damage that had been done and people like Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi played prominent roles.

Jesus used the terms “salt” and “light” to describe the influence of believers in the world. Light seems to refer more to the way people position themselves intentionally and act obtrusively. Salt is more about how we function as part of the fabric of society. Salt is more about people being a positive influence while playing normal roles and doing their normal jobs. Israel was held captive in foreign countries twice in Old Testament times: in Egypt and Babylon. While aspects of light and salt can be seen in the responses to both captivities, in the Exodus event the dynamic is more one of light while the return from exile in Babylon is more one of salt. God rescued Israel from Egypt through Moses who acted like light in a prophetic role where he took on the Egyptian oppressors and motivated the Israelites to leave Egypt. Moses acted against government with the support of spectacular miracles.

The return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile involved quite different dynamics. The person who initiated the return of the exile was Cyrus, a pagan Persian king, who was made aware of what Isaiah and Jeremiah had written and was moved by God to liberate the Jews and fund the reconstruction of Israel. Also Jews, who rose to key

¹ The Jerusalem walls had been destroyed to the point where they no longer served as a defence against attacks. The Babylonians had knocked holes in the walls but had not destroyed the walls completely. Nehemiah repaired the walls by rebuilding what had been broken down. That task was able to be completed in 52 days.

positions in the Persian court, influenced government decisions to bring justice to the Jews and acted on their behalf. Ezra was something like Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs in the Persian government and was very helpful in guiding the king in Jewish policies and came to Jerusalem himself to oversee proceedings. Daniel was an advisor to several Babylonian kings and also to the Persian king Cyrus. Nehemiah was the king's cup-bearer which is probably the equivalent of a personal assistant today. Esther was a Queen in the Persian court and, with Mordecai who was prime minister, rescued the Jews from a genocide plot. Ezekiel and Daniel maintained the faith and national identity of the Jews in exile. Of the Jews who returned to Israel, Zerubbabel was the first governor who organized the return from Babylon, the resettlement and the rebuilding of the temple. Joshua, the high priest and the prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi shaped the faith of the people and many laborers rebuilt the temple and city walls. These people were like salt, often just playing their normal roles and doing their bit. Unlike Moses, they worked with the Persian government, not against it and supernatural miracles did not seem to play a part. God has more than one strategy for liberation.

Israel became an independent nation again after the exile but it was always a small country and minor power at the mercy of more powerful nations like Persia, Greece and Rome. The return from Babylon did not mean a return to the wealth, power and status Israel enjoyed under King David and faithful Jews hoped for a Messiah who would restore Israel to its former glory. Meanwhile prophets like Isaiah (Isa 65:1-17) and Zechariah (Zec 9:9-10) looked beyond national Israel to universal restoration: a "new heavens and a new earth" where political and military power will be unnecessary because peace and well-being will rule the day. The Old Testament's final chapter concludes with Malachi longing for the day when "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays" and a promise that God would send the prophet Elijah before the day of the Lord to prepare the hearts of human beings for the coming of the Lord (Mal 4). When the Lord came, he identified that prophet as John the Baptist. (Matt 11:14)

Freedom in Christ

Mark began his gospel with these words.

“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —

“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Mark 1:1-5)

All four gospel writers began their account of Jesus’ adult life and ministry with John the Baptist preparing the way. In each gospel Jesus was introduced to the public by John the Baptist. While the four gospel accounts about John vary, all the gospels included three important pieces of information that may seem like trivial details to us but were highly significant to their original readers.

1. John baptized in the Jordan River. John 1:28 states that some of the events occurred “in Bethany² beyond the Jordan”. When Israel entered the Promised Land from both the Exodus and the Babylonian exile, they had to cross the Jordan River.
2. John preached and baptized in the wilderness. After the Exodus and Babylonian exile, Israel had to travel through the wilderness before entering Israel.

² Two places were named Bethany: one near Jerusalem and the other on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

3. All four gospel writers quoted from Isaiah 40:1-5. People sometimes assume that Isaiah 40 is simply a prediction of the work of Jesus and John the Baptist but that is not the case. Sometimes when New Testament writers quoted Old Testament prophecies they were treating them as simple predictions. On other occasions they were saying that something that happened before is happening again and that is what the gospel writers are doing here. In Isaiah 40 God commanded Isaiah to comfort his people at the end of the Babylonian exile; announce that the exile was coming to an end; encourage his people to leave Babylon and return to Israel; and assure them that God would enable them to return. Isaiah spoke of a highway through the desert where the hills would be flattened and the dips filled to make for easier travel. No such literal highway was built: this was picture language to say that God would make a way for the Jews to return to their land and it would be much easier than they expected. For Jews in exile this was fulfilled in the benevolence of Cyrus who freed the Jews and funded their return to Israel and the subsequent reconstruction. Isaiah was writing about issues in his own time but the gospel writers applied Isaiah 40 to the emergence of Jesus centuries later.

The Jews who were baptized by John had to travel out of Israel into the wilderness. They confessed their sins and were baptized by John in the Jordan River to symbolize the washing away of their sins. They then left the wilderness, crossed the Jordan and entered into the Promised Land again, as the nation had done twice before. The gospel writers wrote that this fulfills again the prophecy of Isaiah 40 that called on the Jews to return from exile. The message is that First Century Jews were still in exile and still in the wilderness even though they were in their own land. The coming of the kingdom of God was about to be announced (in Mark 1:14) and everyone who had not submitted to the rule of God was still in exile from the only kingdom that would ultimately bring eternal freedom and security. John quoted Isaiah 40 to call Israel to again come out of exile and enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus also came to be baptized and John tried to deter him but Jesus insisted and lined up with sinners and was baptized. Jesus began his ministry the way he was to

end it, by identifying with sinners. (Some scholars speculate that, as Jesus bore our sin on the cross, he also bore our sin in his baptism. Jesus had no sin of his own and John's baptism symbolized the washing away of sin. How could it be real baptism if Jesus had no sin? In Jesus baptism, Jesus not only identified with sinners, he symbolically bore their sin.)

After his baptism, "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil". (Mt 4:1) Adam had been given a simple test but he (and all humanity) failed. On entering the Promised Land, Israel was given a simple test and failed (through Achan), showing that Israel was no different to other humans despite God's purposes for them. Now Jesus is put to the test but he passed. Adam's test was easy to pass. He was given abundant food in quantity and variety. He lacked for nothing but he took fruit he did not need from the one forbidden tree. Achan was given an abundant land full of resources but he was forbidden to take just a few things from one place. In contrast Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights and was very hungry. He was tempted to use his supernatural power to break the fast but overcame temptation despite his extreme and extenuating circumstance. Jesus is the first and only human to pass the test. He is the "New Adam": the first in God's new humanity. Mark (1:13) added an interesting note: "He was with the wild animals." As Adam walked through the garden with the animals, so Jesus, the New Adam, is pictured walking in the wilderness with the wild animals. Later in his gospel, Mark (6:48) described Jesus walking on the lake displaying complete mastery of the wind and the sea. Adam had been given considerable authority over nature (Ge 1:26ff.) and to some extent that had been lost (Ge 3:17ff) but Jesus has complete authority of nature. Passages like these are often used to affirm the divinity of Jesus but they also affirm that Jesus is the true human being, the true Image of God. In Jesus, at last someone passed the test, true humanity was restored and true freedom was beginning to emerge.

In Luke's gospel³, immediately after Jesus was tempted, the following is written.

³ This incident occurs later in Matthew (13:54) and Mark (6:1). Luke did not regard it as the beginning of Jesus' ministry (see v.14-15) but this is Luke's first major statement about Jesus' ministry.

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:14-21)

Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 where Isaiah proclaimed good news to exiled Jews in Babylon that the exile was coming to an end and Israel would be rebuilt and restored. While some exiled Jews (e.g. Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah) gained positions of influence and wealth during the exile, most had become poor and God had good news for the poor. God would heal their broken hearts, set the captives free, release the prisoners and comfort those who mourn. These words are often spiritualized when they are quoted today but Isaiah was referring to the literal physical, economic, social and emotional conditions of the Jews in exile.

While Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled to some extent in the return from Babylon, Jesus claimed that it is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus himself. These words, written centuries before, applied to the ministry that Jesus was beginning and they described the kind of work Jesus would do. The key word is “today”. Many believed God’s kingdom would come someday but Jesus said that the hope of the prophets was being fulfilled

then and there through Jesus himself. God's kingdom was coming because Jesus had come.

Slavery and bondage were significant themes in Jesus' teaching and Jesus offered freedom. The bondage of human beings is far deeper and more pervasive than most imagine and our favorite solutions often lead to further entrapment. Jesus taught that we are all slaves to sin (Jn 8:34) which is at the heart of all injustice. While many gain an illusion of freedom in money and possessions, Jesus warned that these are more likely to master us than free us. (Mt 6:24) While many of his contemporaries harbored thoughts of revenge against the occupying Romans, Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies (Mt 5:38-48). While the Old Testament should have pointed the way to greater freedom, the Pharisees twisted its teaching to impose bondage to a myriad of ridiculous laws as if freedom could be found through amplified self-righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) and numerous exchanges with the Pharisees (Mt 12, 16, 23), Jesus exposed their false teaching and hypocrisy and pointed to a better way. He did not teach a way to freedom but claimed to be, in himself, "the way, truth and life". "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed". (Jn 8:36) While a new religion we call 'Christianity' emerged from the work of Jesus, it is not that Christianity saves but that God saves through Jesus. No religion saves, and that applies to Christianity as well as all other religions, but Jesus has done what no religion can do. It is not about a new religion; it's about Jesus (Jn 4:21-24). God came to earth in Jesus to do what no religion can do and set us free.

Jesus also performed miracles. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, raised the dead, cast out demons and forgave sin⁴. Why did Jesus do miracles? At one level, he wanted to help people and sometimes it required a miracle. At a deeper level, by doing these miracles, Jesus gave us a window into the future world. Jesus healed the sick in anticipation of the day when sickness and disability will be a thing of the past. He fed the hungry as a foretaste of the day when hunger and poverty will be eradicated. Jesus forgave sin because one day sin will be vanquished. He raised the

⁴ The claim by Jesus to be able to forgive sins was seen as a claim to divine authority. His ability to heal a paralyzed man was presented as evidence that he can also forgive sin. (See Mt 9:1-8)

dead because the time is coming when death will be no more. Jesus cast out demons as a preview of the day when all that is evil will be permanently eradicated from human experience. When Jesus performed miracles he rolled back the curtain to give us a glimpse of the consummation of his kingdom when we will be “free indeed”.

The death of Jesus came about because one of his own disciples betrayed him, and the Jewish religious and political leaders pressured the occupying Roman rulers⁵ to crucify Jesus. Ironically, the one God anointed to ‘proclaim freedom for the prisoners’ and ‘set the oppressed free’ was captured, imprisoned, oppressed, unjustly tried, condemned, humiliated, tortured and executed. “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him”. (Acts 2:24)

At a personal level, the death and resurrection of Jesus enabled our personal salvation. This involves various aspects of freedom that are implied by a number of common Christian terms⁶.

- *Resurrection* –Freedom from eternal death and the promise of resurrection to eternal life.
- *Forgiveness* - Freedom from the offence of sin between us and God. Our sin has been covered by Jesus’ actions. (I.e. atonement) God seeks our best interests even though we once rebelled against him.
- *Pardon* - Freedom from the punishment of sin required by the law. (Forgiveness and pardon are not the same. E.g. Good parents always forgive but don’t necessarily always pardon children because children need to learn by facing consequences.)
- *Reconciliation* – Freedom from a broken relationship with God. We are now God’s friends.

⁵ The Romans permitted the Jews to operate their own courts but only Romans were permitted to execute prisoners. That is why Jesus was sent to Pilate. The Jews wanted Jesus executed but were not able to order that themselves.

⁶ These may differ from some traditional definitions of these terms used in theological texts because this is an attempt to define them in terms of freedom. I trust they are still faithful to the traditional understandings of these words.

- *Justification* – Freedom from our criminal record of sin. Whereas a pardon means that God decides to not punish us, justification means that God treats us as if we had never done anything wrong in the first case. We are declared ‘not guilty’: our convictions are quashed.
- *Redemption* – Freedom from bondage. As slaves were redeemed by paying a price, the Bible teaches that Jesus paid a great price to redeem us from the penalty of the law (Gal 3:13); the law’s obligations (Gal 4:4, 5); the power of sin (Tit 2:14; 1 Pet 1:18, 19); and the power of Satan (Heb 2:14, 15).

The use of all these terms underscores the extent of the freedom Jesus secured for us. In a sense they are all aspects of the one thing because they were all achieved on the first Easter between Friday and Sunday. However the Bible embraces all these concepts to reflect the many ways we have been set free.

At a deeper level, the death and resurrection of Jesus solved God’s problem. While it is true that Jesus solved our problem, we had that problem because God had a problem. God loves us and wants to save us; he wants to forgive. God can’t just do that because he would then be like the corrupt judge who lets his criminal mates go free when they should face justice. God has a dilemma: he is caught between his love and justice. People deserve punishment but God loves them. This dilemma of God is beautifully articulated in Hosea 11, especially verse 8. The death and resurrection of Jesus resolved the dilemma of God so that God is able to forgive and maintain his justice.

At a cosmic level, the death and resurrection of Jesus defeated Satan and the forces of evil. Alluding to the job he would do on Satan, Jesus said, “No one can enter a strong man’s house without first tying him up. Then he can plunder the strong man’s house”. (Mk 3:27) Years after the resurrection, Paul wrote, “He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross”. (Col 2: 13-15) Jesus expressed intent to plunder Satan’s house and Paul wrote that Jesus had “disarmed” the powers of evil, and “made a public spectacle of

them, triumphing over them by the cross”. While forgiveness of personal sins was achieved through the cross, this victory over evil is not just the sum total of all forgiven sin. Paul has the victory procession of a triumphant Roman general in mind⁷ where he would strip his captives naked and parade them behind his chariot: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross”. In similar fashion, Jesus put Satan and evil on display in utter defeat.

Consider what happened to Jesus in his Passion. Why did it have to be so cruel? There is no indication that the Old Testament sacrificial animals were treated cruelly so Jesus’ death is somewhat inconsistent with Old Testament sacraments that prefigure it. How did Jesus behave in response? Jesus exemplified his own teaching on how to respond to evil doers (as well as other New Testament teaching). Jesus did not take revenge; he prayed for his enemies; he forgave them; and he overcame evil with good. The forces of evil threw all they had at Jesus and yet Jesus absorbed the evil treatment and responded in love. He acted righteously in the toughest of circumstances and trusted himself to God to raise him from the dead and vindicate him.

I recall watching a world title boxing contest on TV decades ago. The winning boxer⁸ typically had a fast moving and mobile style but for one round he lay back on the ropes, covered up and let his opponent hit him. In the following rounds he then resumed his normal style and won. Observers were mystified about the tactics of that one round. When he was interviewed after the fight he explained that he wanted to show his opponent that the best he could do, would not be enough to hurt him. He believed that the round in which he appeared to be losing was when he psychologically defeated his opponent.

That is a crude illustration of what Jesus did to Satan on the cross. Satan rallied all his forces against Jesus. He seduced one of Jesus’ own disciples to betray him, used false religious leaders to condemn him and even the mighty Roman government and

⁷ See Carson, H.M. *Colossians and Philemon, An Introduction and Commentary*. Pages 71 and 72

⁸ I’m fairly sure it was Muhammad Ali, but I’m not certain now.

army to carry out the execution and then guard the tomb. Jesus suffered a ferocious assault but just rose again from the dead. Jesus did not just survive and recovered over time but he rose from the tomb victorious, totally restored and appeared to his followers as the risen, glorified Lord just three days after the cross. The flipside to Jesus' victory is the defeat of Satan: "the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." (Col 2:15)

The Ascension of Jesus is often passed over but it is very significant to our theme of freedom. God exalted Jesus. In Peter's sermon at Pentecost, he emphasized (v.33-35) that God did not only raise Jesus from the dead but Jesus also ascended back into heaven and rules the universe. The Jesus they saw crucified not only rose from the dead but now sits on God's throne. God made Jesus both Lord and Christ. (v.34-36) Peter concluded his sermon with "therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (v.36). In this statement, Peter contrasted God's treatment of Jesus with the Jews treatment of Jesus. You crucified Jesus but God made him both Lord and Messiah. You rejected Jesus but God exalted him to the highest place.

The Ascension marked a significant development in the Godhead: something significant had changed. At the first Christmas, God became man in Jesus but at the Ascension, a man (Jesus) became God. In 100BC Jesus was God but not man but he took on humanity so he is both God and man. After the Ascension, Jesus remained both God and man and now reigns over the universe on God's throne. Jesus embraced humanity in the Incarnation, retained his humanity and then elevated humanity into the Godhead. Right now there is a man, Jesus, ruling the universe as God. (1 Ti 2:5) This is great news for those who seek freedom. The God who rules the universe and guides history is not remote from human suffering and oppression. The Jesus we worship and serve has experienced these issues first hand. He was born in a conquered land under foreign rule and oppression. As a child he survived a state-ordered attempt on his life and he and his family had to flee to a foreign country as refugees. He lived under peasant conditions in a poor community and, as an adult, was constantly under surveillance. He was slandered, persecuted, falsely convicted,

tortured and executed. Jesus knows what suffering is like and he is the God who rules the universe and he is still working towards the goals he stated in Luke 4:14-21.

In order to empower his followers to continue the work of Jesus, God gave Jesus the Holy Spirit which he poured out on his followers. (Ac 2: 33) Peter explained that Jesus received the Holy Spirit from the Father and “poured” it out on his followers and that is what they had witnessed that very morning at Pentecost.

Following the giving of the Holy Spirit, several new developments and practices occurred amongst the early believers. (Acts 2: 42-47) We will note just two of them. First, they had a new impact. (v.43) People held Christians in awe because “wonders and signs” were performed by the apostles.

This is third time the words “wonders and signs” are used in this chapter.

- (v.19) The Old Testament predicted that “wonders and signs” would occur after the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- (v.22) Jesus performed “wonders and signs” to demonstrate God’s approval.
- (v. 43) The apostles began to do the same things Jesus did: “wonders and signs”.

Everyone was filled with awe, not just because of miracles but because the apostles were doing the same “wonders and signs” that Jesus did. The Jewish and Roman leaders thought they had got rid of Jesus but now, more people than ever were doing “wonders and signs” just like Jesus.

Secondly, the Christian community developed new social and economic priorities. (v.44-45) Following Jesus meant new attitudes to possessions and other people. The Holy Spirit motivated these new Christians to share possessions or sell possessions to give to people in need. Some have claimed that the early Christians practiced communism but that is not true. In communism the state or group owns all property. It’s clear from the broader story (E.g. Acts 5: Ananias and Sapphira) that Christians owned their own property but shared. There was no compulsion to give up property, nor any policy about collective ownership. What was happening was not communism but spontaneous generosity. They had compassion for needy and made sacrifices.

Jesus taught his followers to give to the poor and renounce greed. These Christians were simply doing what Jesus had taught. They renounced materialism and greed and gave to those in need.

Before we leave the gospels and epistles and move on to Revelation to consider our future hope, let's consider one more freedom already secured by Jesus that figures significantly in Paul's epistles, freedom from the law. Here are three of the many passages on Christian Freedom.

(Gal 5: 1, 13-14) "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. --- You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

(Rom 6:18) "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."

(Rom 8:1-4) "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

These passages (and many others) teach that Jesus freed us from the punishment for our sins required by the law by bearing that punishment for us. They also teach us that we are free from obligations to the Old Testament law itself but that does not mean we can do as we like. Jesus has come and we are now called to follow Jesus and be Christ like. If we do that we will achieve better outcomes than if we tick off a

long list of laws. Galatians 5:14 puts it another way, if we just love others, we will obey the law. The law was never intended to show us how good we are, but how sinful we are, and drive us to Jesus for forgiveness. (Rom 3:20)

The context behind Galatians is that Jewish converts were teaching gentile converts that Jesus was not enough and that they needed to also obey the Jewish laws, especially circumcision, to be full Christians. Paul responded that this would drag them back into slavery to laws. Salvation and full acceptance with God is through Jesus alone and nothing else can be added to that. It is all about Jesus alone and any Jesus plus message should be rejected. Paul's argument was that if any laws are added then they have to be obeyed completely. If they fail to obey the law on any occasion, their salvation and acceptance with God is at risk, at least in their own minds. They will be always be plagued by such questions as, 'How do you know if you have obeyed all the laws?' and 'How do you know if you have obeyed any of them well enough?' They then end up enslaved in the constant burden of trying to be good enough. Paul taught that we don't have to be good enough: it's about grace. God saves us through the work of Jesus so we are free of obligations to the law. We then should respond to this freedom by living to please God but we do this as free and accepted people.

In 1520, Martin Luther⁹ wrote a book entitled *The Freedom of the Christian*. Luther summarized Christian freedom with two contradictory, yet complementary statements. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." And "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." These two contradictory statements should be held together in tension¹⁰. This paradox captures Christian freedom according to Luther and the rest of the book develops the idea that Christians are completely free but we have been set free to serve other people.

⁹ Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. 1520. The quote I use is in the third paragraph of the book which has been published in numerous forms and compilations.

¹⁰ Many Christian truths involve paradoxes where opposites are held in tension. E.g. the Trinity: God is one but there are three persons to the Godhead; the Bible - Romans is inspired by God but also the thoughts of Paul; Jesus is God but Jesus is man. Truth is found by affirming both sides of the paradox in tension, realizing that we are grappling with mysteries.

Howard A. Snyder¹¹ wrote a response to an article “claiming that ‘the gift of Christ’ is a gift with no strings attached”. Snyder’s response: “Of course the gospel comes with strings attached! Or rather a yoke (Mt 11:29), a cross (Lk 9:23), a community (Eph 4:25), and a mission (John 20:21). --- The reference is to the New Covenant (not the Old) in which by grace God’s law – his character – is written on the heart. The point of the gospel is not to escape from law but the law written within, internalized – where we find it to be a law of life, love and grace. (Rom 8:1-4; cf. Ps 119) --- Law and gospel are not opposites but rather a gracious circle of receiving and giving.”

Tom Wright¹² wrote that the Old Testament laws are like signposts that point us to Jesus. “When you arrive at the destination you don’t need the signposts any more, not because they were worthless but precisely because they were correct. --- The starting point is to realize that the Jewish scriptures aren’t to be seen as a timeless code of behavior, but as the story which leads to Jesus. This doesn’t mean we can casually set aside bits we don’t like or understand. When things are set aside --- it’s not because they’re irrelevant but because the deeper truth to which they pointed has now arrived.”

Embracing freedom from law is important for all Christians and it is particularly relevant to Christians who work for freedom and justice. Advocacy and lifestyle responses can easily slip into legalistic rules and people who don’t comply can be regarded as inferiors. Such strategies can place enormous burdens on people and lead them into slavery. I once helped a young man who became seriously ill due to malnourishment because he attempted to eat nothing but fair trade food. In his context, he could not access enough fair trade food but felt too guilty to purchase from normal supermarkets. He also accepted a difficult teaching position at a very challenging school in his first teaching appointment and this led to disastrous consequences. Other Christians (who lived in places where fair trade products were more available) had told him he should do these things. They took little account of his particular circumstances but imposed rules to be obeyed. I could cite other examples

¹¹ Howard A. Snyder. In a letter to the editor in *Christianity Today*, April 2017. Pages 9-10.

¹² Wright, Tom. *Mark for Everyone*. 2001. Pages 93-94.

of people who have been hurt when responses to injustice have been reduced to legalistic laws. Let us encourage responses to injustice but do so in the freedom of the gospel rather than law.

Free at Last –future hope

“Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.” (Revelation 21:1-7)

We have reached our destination. There have been foreshadows of freedom so far in the Bible story but now we reach the real deal. In both the first two chapters and last two chapters of the Bible, God creates a new earth. The creation of the earth is how the story begins and ends.

The Bible begins with God creating the universe and everything in it and everything was “very good”. The Bible ends with a new universe: “a new heaven and a new earth.” (Rev 21:1) In between there is the story of the Fall and God’s work of salvation through Jesus. Many treat that as the whole story but the story of the Bible is not just about God saving us but about God saving the whole universe, you and I included.

The story of the Bible is like the story of a car crash. You start with a good car, it gets smashed, gets fixed and you end up with a brand new car. So God created a good world; it got smashed; it's getting fixed and one day we will have a brand new world in a new universe. God's purpose is for everything to come under the rule of Jesus Christ. "He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment –to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Eph 1:9-10)

God's goal is not just that our souls will be saved and sins forgiven, but for everything in the universe to be restored and find its rightful place under the rule of Christ. The Bible starts with a good world and God's purpose is, at the end of the story, that once again there will be a good world where everything submits to the rule of Christ and everything is "very good". God's salvation embraces the restoration of all that is wrong with the world.

Unfortunately some Christians think that God is not interested in restoring the world: only saving souls. There are many reasons for this, but allow me to highlight two...

(1) Ancient Greek philosophy

Centuries before Jesus, Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato taught that everything physical is bad and only the spiritual is good. Some early Christians were very influenced by Greek philosophy and believed that physical aspects of life are bad and only the spiritual are good. Colossians and 1 John were written to refute these beliefs. However Greek philosophy has continued to influence the way Christians think so today many think that God cares about spiritual aspects of life but not physical aspects. For example:

- God cares whether you say grace –but not whether other people are starving.
- God cares about what happens at church – but not about your work place.
- God cares about theology – but not God's created world.

If you think like that, you did not learn it from Bible. Too much Plato: not enough Jesus!

(2) We go to heaven when we die.

2 Corinthians 5:1-4 teaches that we have a home in heaven when we die. Therefore many Christians believe that our final destination is heaven. However heaven is not our final destination. Revelation 21 teaches that our final destination is the new earth. Heaven is the stopover. God hasn't made the new earth yet so when we die we have a place in heaven but when the events of Revelation 21 occur, we will live on the new earth. In fact, not only will the believers live on the new earth but God will leave heaven and come to live on earth with us.

(Rev 21:2-3) "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

At the end of the Bible, we don't go to heaven to live with God, but God comes to earth to live with us. We will not be disembodied spirits sitting on clouds like Casper the Friendly Ghost, but physically resurrected men and women inhabiting the new earth.

The work of Jesus in his death and resurrection makes this possible. The only people who can inhabit the new earth are those who are forgiven and put right with God through Jesus. If not for what Jesus did in his first coming, no-one would be able to live on the new earth of Revelation 21. The provision of personal salvation through Jesus is central to the Bible story but it is not the whole story. God is not just saving you and me; but saving the whole creation. God will restore the whole earth and populate it with the children of God.

What will the new earth be like? We don't know but Bible presents images to give us an idea and they paint a picture of perfect freedom. It will be ideal: beautiful, glorious and everything will be good. There will be no tears, death, crying, pain, darkness or evil. There will be no temple (21:22) because God will live on earth with us. Who

needs religion when God is your neighbor? Some think of eternity as one big church service. It will be the opposite that!

The new earth will have a large and diverse population: the most multicultural, multilingual society ever. (Rev 7:9) There will be no place for racism. Isaiah saw the new earth as a place where war and conflict have no place. “They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” (Isa 2:4) There will be no more war or military training. Weapons will be converted into tools of food production. “The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox”. (Isa 65:25) Even animals will give up violence. There will be no more predators: even lions will eat plants. Jesus is “the Prince of Peace”, not the prince of war.

The new earth will have a just and stable government. Jesus will reign and there will be no room for rivals. Revelation 11:15 says “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever”. The world has yet to see fair and just rule consistently exercised but at the end of the Bible story there will be just government that will never end. It is not that Jesus will become king. He has always been king: everything belongs to him but finally everything will submit to his rule.

The new earth will be free of evil. Every force of evil that robs human beings of fullness of life and freedom will be eliminated. Our current earth contrasts with this description of the new earth. While there is much good, there is also a great deal of evil. Allow me to highlight 4 evils described in the earlier chapters of Revelation, that we must contend with now, but will have no place in the new earth.

(1) Disasters

Revelation catalogues a long list of the disasters that impact our fallen world. Here are just some...

- Volcanos and earthquakes causing massive destruction. (8:6-7)
- Pollution of the seas destroying a third of all sea creatures. (8:8-9)

- Water pollution causing many people to die. (8:10-11)
- War –killing a third of all mankind. (9:13-19)
- Incurable diseases. (16:2)
- Heat intensifying under the scorching sun. (16:8-9)
- Drought. (16:12)

It all sounds very familiar doesn't it? Many of them occurred in the Old Testament yet most of these disasters are happening today. Could some of them be direct judgments of God like the drought in Elijah's time? Many of them are certainly the results of human sin. E.g. Wars are caused by pride, greed, hate or revenge. Many sea creatures are dying because of pollution or over fishing and some whole species are disappearing. We could do something about that if we were prepared to meet the cost. In the new earth these disasters won't happen.

(2) The beast.

Revelation 13 refers to an evil being with seven heads called the beast. There are many theories about the identity of the beast but I think it was a code word for the Roman Empire. Codes were used because it was too dangerous to directly criticize the Romans. The Roman Caesars behaved like beasts and the seven heads are probably the seven Caesars that demanded that they be worshipped as gods. Many early Christians were persecuted and killed because they believed that Jesus is Lord. If Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not Lord and Jesus is Lord over Caesar. That was just one of the many evils of Rome.

Through the ages many nations have behaved like Rome. Nations that become powerful empires often do what they like. They take the resources of smaller nations as Rome did. They invade, kill and manipulate the global economy to get what they want. So the beast of Revelation is probably not just Rome but all the oppressive empires in history who behaved like Rome. There will be no such beast in the new earth.

There is also another beast that looks like a lamb. (13:1-18) Jesus is the true Lamb of Revelation. The song of the angels is “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain” (5:12). What looks like a lamb (or Jesus) but is really a beast? False religion! It looks like a lamb (like Jesus) but is really a beast and it speaks like a dragon (13:11). Religions can be false in different ways. Christians usually think of false doctrine but it can also be false behavior. When religions bully and exploit people like Rome did, they act like beasts. The beast of false religion abuses children, covers it up, persecutes, tortures and kills. Many have been killed in the name of religion. That happened to Jesus and Stephen and it continues to happen today. The fundamentalist atheists who criticize religion for being evil are often citing valid examples. Evil religion is very real but it is the beast that pretends to be the lamb, not the Lamb of God. There will no such beast in the new earth.

(3) Babylon

In Revelation 17 and 18, Babylon is pictured as both an immoral woman and a wicked city. References to Babylon go back to Genesis and it may have been linked to the Tower of Babel. Babylon conquered Israel in 587BC, massacred them and took many off as slaves for 70 years in the period known as the exile. The word ‘Babylon’ became a symbol of economic enterprise, political power and military might organized against God and without God. In Revelation, Babylon stands for all that opposes the people of God. Babylon is glittering and seductive yet obsessed by power, greed, lust and pride but she is overthrown along with everyone who aligns with her. The people of God are warned to keep their distance in case they are seduced by Babylon’s sins and share her downfall.

Babylon and the beast are examples of structural evil. Evil is not just a matter of individual sins but evil structures rig the systems of the world. Australians can work 35 hours per week in Australian factories and be well off but Bengalis do the same work for 70 hours per week and get paid a pittance so their children are undernourished and can’t get medical treatment when they are sick. Yet the products of those factories are sold in Australian shops. In other places children work as slaves in mines, plantations and brothels or are forced to fight in wars. This is structural evil, not just

individual sin. Evil is in the system – in the way things are set up. It's the work of Babylon.

(4) Satan

Satan entered the story in the third chapter of the Bible and exits in the story in the third last chapter. Just as Satan had no place at the start of the Bible, he will have no place at the end. Satan exits the story before the resurrection, judgment and the creation of the new earth. Satan is an imposter: he had no place in the beginning and will have no place at the end.

Let's now look at the events leading up to the end of the Bible.

Rev 18	Rev 19	Rev 20	Rev 21-22
Babylon destroyed	The beast destroyed	Satan destroyed	The new earth

In the third last chapter Satan is destroyed. In the fourth last chapter the beast is destroyed. In the fifth last chapter Babylon is destroyed. All of Satan's allies are destroyed: the oppressive empires and structures of evil are all obliterated. Satan is then destroyed before God creates a new earth free of evil.

All of the above is a promise of total freedom. All pain is healed, all needs met and all threats are expelled and obliterated.

How do we live now in the light of the new earth? Let me suggest two responses...

(1) Hope

Most of us have had some experience with suffering and tragedy and we hope for a better world. Our first baby died. At that time people comforted us by saying it will all work out for good and one day we will understand. Some told us that our lives are God's tapestry and now we can only see the back and it makes no sense but one day God will turn the tapestry around and we will see God's wonderful purpose in all life's

tragedies. I do believe God is sovereign and is directing history to a good end. However I don't see any chapter in Revelation where God takes us aside and turns over the tapestry and explains how all the rotten things in life were somehow good. What I do see in Revelation though, is something far better. For all who have lost children, Jesus will do something far better than give an explanation: he will raise them up. Isn't that just like Jesus? In the gospels Jesus didn't explain why people were sick or disabled, he healed them; he didn't explain why people were hungry, he fed them; he didn't explain why loved ones died, he raised them from the dead. I don't know about you but I'll take a resurrection over an explanation any day.

Jesus performed miracles to give us a window into his future world where sickness, death, crying, pain and evil will be no more. We can look back to what Jesus has done and then look forward to the day when we will all be raised and all be healed.

(2) Transformation

If we want to live in the new earth we need to be committed to transformation here and now. God will rule and totally permeate life in the new earth. If you want nothing to do with God in this life, will you want to have everything to do with God in the next life? If you want nothing to do with God, is the new earth a place you really want to go? You may not like the judgment option but if you don't want to submit to God's rule, you won't like the new earth either. The only choices we have are God's rule or God's judgment. If we choose to submit to God's rule, we choose the path of transformation.

Transformation begins when we choose to follow Jesus but that must continue all through life and into the next life. Jesus preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near". (Matt 4:17) The kingdom of God is not some land or territory but the rule of God. Those who submit to the rule of God, enter the kingdom of God. That is why Jesus calls us to "repent". Repent means to stop ignoring and rebelling against God and submit to his rule.

The Greek word, translated “repent” in Jesus’ call in Matthew 4:17, has many shades of meaning that are not apparent in English.

- It’s a command (imperative) –not an option or suggestion.
- Applies to everyone (2nd plural) –not just really bad people or very religious people.
- It means repent now (present) –not when we like.
- It means keep on repenting for the rest of our lives. (Continuous present)

That is, we are to repent now and begin a lifestyle of repentance where we are constantly growing and changing. In other words transformation must become a way of life. Paul used different language to say the same thing. “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)

Why will the new earth be different to this world? The only people who enter the kingdom of God and ultimately share in the new earth will be those who repent and are serious about living God’s way. When the rich young man asked how to gain eternal life Jesus did not tell him to pray the sinner’s prayer but to “sell your possessions and give to the poor”. There is no place in the new earth for people of greed who don’t care about others and are not prepared to repent. If people are like that in the new earth, it would just be like this earth. On the other hand Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1ff) did repent of his greed, selfishness and dishonesty and Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to his house”. Did he deserve salvation? Of course not! It’s all of grace. However Zacchaeus did repent and God started the process of transforming his character.

In the new earth there will be no violence, lies, immorality, hypocrisy, selfishness, pride or greed because the people who live there have repented of that stuff and God won’t allow it. If we won’t live like that in the new earth, should we not turn away from that sort of behavior in this earth? Our character is the one thing we take out of this life. Jesus called us to repent because it is in the continual renewal of our character that we are being prepared for the new earth.

Why will the environment of the new earth be different?

God will miraculously create a new earth with no suffering and it will be very good. But God has done that before. In Genesis 1 and 2 God created this earth and it was “very good”. (Gen 2:15) People were commanded to “take care of” the wonderful environment God gave us but we have not done a very good job. The human race has done considerable harm to God’s earth. Many environmental problems are partly or totally caused by human activity.

God will not create a new earth for us to treat like we treated this earth. That is part of the transformation of repentance. Just as our character, personal morality and spirituality needs constant transformation, so we need to be transformed in how we treat the earth. We can’t create the new earth or usher in the kingdom of God. Only God can do that. Yet we can learn to be better stewards of this earth. That will be good for this earth now and prepare us for the new earth. Paul pictured the whole creation as “groaning” as it waits for liberation. (Romans 8:19ff) “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed”. The creation is also longing for freedom: for the day when it will at last be inhabited by the children of God who will treat God’s creation in a godly manner.

The Bible story starts with a new earth and ends with a new earth where Jesus will reign. We can pray with confidence, “May your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is now done in heaven”.

Our story of freedom began when God created human beings with total freedom, which we lost through our own doing. The promise of freedom restored started to take shape with God’s promises to Abraham and, in the last chapters of Revelation, those promises are fully realized. Many characters made important contributions but the hero of the story is Jesus. Remember what Jesus said he would do in Luke 4:18-19...

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,
 to set the oppressed free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

When we get to the end of the Bible, Jesus has done the job. Free at last!

Our part in the story of freedom

Timeframes in the story line				
Who knows?	About 2,000BC	About 30AD	Who knows? Over 2,000 years so far.	Who knows?
Creation	Abraham	Jesus	OUR STORY	New Creation

There is a big gap in the story so far. When you consider the events we have covered, we don't know when creation took place or when Jesus will come again and act decisively to eliminate evil and establish his new creation. We do know that the bulk of the Old Testament story from Abraham to Jesus took about 2,000 years. We also know that it has been over 2,000 years since Jesus and the events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. What is this big gap in the story line? It is our story?

Our challenge is to find our role in the story of freedom. In doing that, we need to realize that the quest to reclaim freedom is ultimately God's quest and we are bit-players in his story. God's story has been playing out for centuries; the hero has entered the stage and won the decisive victory and he knows exactly where he is going to take the story in the end. Our part will only be significant, to the extent that it fits with what Jesus has done and what he intends for the future.

In writing this I have been impacted by what the Bible teaches regarding the extent to which human beings are enslaved and the corresponding expansive freedom Jesus

offers. There are Christians who focus on social justice and others who focus on personal salvation and piety. The Bible deals comprehensively with freedom; from global political and economic oppression to freedom from illness and disability to freedom from personal sin and legalistic laws. Freedom from social injustice cannot be separated from freedom from sin. It is not enough to go to church, preach the gospel and have quiet times and hope the world will improve. The Exodus would not have happened without political confrontation and community mobilization and the return from the Exile required skillful diplomacy, courageous advocacy, infrastructure reconstruction, project management, and economic and social reform etc. However it is equally not enough to attempt to change political and economic systems without concern for the personal sin of people involved. The Bible teaches that both oppressors and oppressed are slaves to sin and can only be set free by Jesus. This is not a plea to impose Christian beliefs inappropriately on people in need but a call to recognize the depth of the problem. Oppression is not overcome when victims are protected from oppressors but when oppressors recognize the evil of their ways and renounce them. At the bottom line we are all slaves to ourselves: our selfishness, pride, anger, fear, insecurities –the list goes on. The Bible demands holistic responses that take all causes and expressions of slavery and bondage seriously and calls us to be Christ-like in our responses.

Bibliography

Baldwin, Joyce G. *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, An Introduction and Commentary*. England: Inter-Varsity Press. 1976.

Bewes, Richard. *The Lamb Wins*. Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications. 2000.

Blaiklock, E.M. *The Acts of the Apostles, An Historical Commentary*. London: The Tyndale Press. 1961.

Bruce, F.F. *Commentary on the Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1980.

Carson, H.M. *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon, an Introduction and Commentary*. Great Britain: Inter-Varsity Press. 1976.

Christianity Today. April 2017 edition. USA: Published by Christianity Today.

Fleming, D.C. *The Old Testament Speaks. Volume 10 Hosea – Malachi*. Hong Kong: Living Books for All, 1983.

Keil, C.f. and Delitzsch, F. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes. Volume VII. Isaiah*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1975.

Keil, C.f. and Delitzsch, F. *Commentary on the Old Testament. The Twelve Minor Prophets. Volume II*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1967.

Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Originally published in 1520. My quote is taken from a compilation of three of Luther's works entitled *Three Treatises*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1970.

Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke. A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1978.

Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to St. Luke. An Introduction and Commentary*. England: Inter-Varsity Press. 1974.

New Bible Dictionary, Second Edition. England: Inter-Varsity Press. 1980.

Peskett, Howard and Ramachandra, Vinoth. *The Message of Mission*. England: Inter-Varsity Press. 2003.

Prior, David. *The Message of Joel, Micah and Habakkuk*. Great Britain: IVP, 1988.

Wright, Tom. *Mark for Everyone*. Great Britain: The University Press, Cambridge. 2001

Young, Robert. *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*. Iowa: Riverside Book and Bible House.