

Understanding God's Plan

The Bible is a historical record of God's interaction with human beings - in particular His promises to Abraham and how He will fulfill them. Through this account, we see many examples of how people live, which help us understand God and His plan for each one of us regardless of whether one has faith in His Son Jesus or not. Take for example the following account when the apostle Peter healed a crippled man at the Beautiful Gate entrance of the Temple – what do we learn from the Jews, Peter, and Jesus Christ about God's plan?

But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. But you denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which is through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. (Acts 3:12-18)

The Jews

When Peter heals the cripple at the Temple, we can see that "the people" are Jews when Peter addresses them as "men of Israel" and speaks of "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers." Peter confronts them for their part in crucifying the Christ by choosing who would receive the pardon from Pilate. Yet while acting out of ignorance, their actions were necessary to fulfill God's plan.

But Jesus made no further answer; so Pilate marveled. Now at the feast he used to release for them any one prisoner whom they requested. And the man named Barabbas had been imprisoned with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the crowd went up and began asking him to do as he had been accustomed to do for them. And Pilate answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he was aware that the chief priests had delivered Him over because of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to ask him to release Barabbas for them instead. And answering again, Pilate was saying to them, "Then what shall I do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?" And they shouted again, "Crucify Him!" But Pilate was saying to them, "Why? What evil did He do?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him!" And wishing to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas for them, and after having Jesus scourged, he delivered Him over to be crucified. (Mark 15:5-15; Matt 27:15-26; Luke 23:13-25)

The Jews chose Barabbas to receive the pardon. The crowd's role in God's plan insured that Jesus would be crucified on the day when His death would be associated with the blood of the Passover lamb. Just as the last plague of Egypt passed over those Israelites whose door lintels had the blood of the unblemished lamb, so has God passed over the sins of those who place their faith in the blood of Jesus Christ.

This day was significant for Jews – it was the day of Preparation for the Passover (John 19:14). The apostle John would identify Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God that would atone for the sins of mankind (John 1:29, 36).

The timing of Jesus' crucifixion is confusing and the source of many debates. Within the context of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion of Christ, two festivals were occurring: Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

Passover was an annual festival that started with the sacrifice of the unblemished lamb in the late Thursday afternoon and followed by a Passover meal that evening. By Jewish reckoning of time, where the next day starts at 6 pm, the Passover meal would be seen as a Friday meal.

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Passover commemorated the last meal in Egypt while the last plague upon Egypt took place and passed over all those whose home had the blood of an unblemished lamb on its lintel and doorposts; it was a memorial of redemption from the angel of death (Ex 12:1-13, 23-27).

The morning after Passover was seen as the "day of preparation" for the Sabbath when the Feast of the Unleavened Bread took place that evening (by Jewish reckoning Saturday) and lasted seven days.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread commemorated the day that God brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt. In their preparation of their hasty departure, God instructed the Israelites not to leaven their bread (Ex 2:14-20; 13:1-16).

These two festivals were celebrated over eight days and Passover overlapped "the day of preparation" for the Sabbath that starts off the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. By the first century, the proximity of Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread caused many Jews to consider the two memorials as a single festival. In the Gospels, there are instances in which the reference to Passover includes the seven day Feast of the Unleavened Bread or visa versa (Matt 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 22:1, 7-8).

The Synoptics understand the Passover to include the Feast of the Unleavened Bread and record the Passover meal on Thursday evening, which by Jewish reckoning was the start of Friday.

John considers Passover as taking place on Friday evening, which by Jewish reckoning was the start of Saturday and the beginning of the Sabbath. John saw the Passover meal coinciding with the first evening meal of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

Jesus Christ was crucified on Friday 9 a.m. (3rd hour) and died by 3 p.m. (9th hour). Both the Synoptics and John call this Friday Preparation Day - the day before the weekly Sabbath. Jesus' body was placed in the tomb late Friday afternoon before 6 p.m. and before the next day by Jewish reckoning.

The Apostle Peter

When Peter confronts the Jews at the Temple, his bold fearless character is new and different from his behavior before Jesus Christ was crucified.

At the time of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane, Peter fled:

And Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew out his sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels? Therefore, how will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" At that time Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me as you would against a robber? Every day I used to sit in the temple teaching and you did not seize Me. But all this has taken place in order that the Scriptures of the prophets would be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left Him and fled. (Matt 26:50-56; Mark 14:45-50)

When Jesus was held for trial by Jewish religious authorities, he denied being associated with the Christ, not once but three times:

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant-girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he... (continues)

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... denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." And he went out into the entryway. And when the servant-girl saw him, she began once more to say to the bystanders, "This is one of them!" But again he was denying it. And after a little while the bystanders were again saying to Peter, "Surely you are one of them, for you are also a Galilean." But he began to curse and swear, "I do not know this man you are talking about!" And immediately a rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said the statement to him, "Before a rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And throwing himself down, he began to cry. (Mark 14:66-72; Matt 26:69-75; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:25-27)

Despite Peter's bravado (Matt 26:33-34; Mark 14:29-30), the fulfillment of Jesus' prediction of how Peter would behave (Matt 26:75; Mark 14:72; Luke 22:61) produced in Peter a bitter disappointment in himself (that he was not as steadfast as he thought) and for letting Jesus down (and he knew Jesus knew).

But what happens when you are forgiven by a friend who you failed spectacularly? Jesus not only forgives Peter but entrusts him with the caring of His faithful followers albeit repeating a question of love three times as a painful reminder of three denials.

This was now the third time that Jesus revealed Himself to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead. Now when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again, a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" Peter was hurt because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep. (John 21:14-17)

After the Ascension, Peter is emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit and no longer fears death for Jesus Christ. In God's plan, Peter experiences both disappointment (in himself and for failing Jesus) and total forgiveness from Jesus so that he would serve boldly and not fail Jesus Christ. Peter's experience of his sinful past, caused him to appreciate the magnanimity of the love of God and His Son all the more.

Jesus Christ

While revealing hints of God's plan with enigma, Jesus indicates that He has His Father's foreknowledge of the future.

saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day." (Luke 9:22)

With His Father's foreknowledge, Jesus acts in a manner to carry it out God's plan following a precise timetable. On the evening of the Last supper, Jesus instructs Judas Iscariot to do his dirty deed and makes sure that they would be found to have swords on Gethsemane.

When Jesus had said these things, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly I say to you that one of you will betray Me." The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one He was speaking. Lying back on Jesus' chest was one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved. So Simon Peter nodded to this disciple and said to him, "Tell us who it is of whom He is speaking." He then simply leaned back on Jesus' chest and said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus then answered, "That man is the one for whom I shall dip the piece of bread and give it to him." So when He had dipped the piece of bread, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After this, Satan then entered him. Therefore Jesus said to him, "What you are doing, do it quickly." (John 13:21-27)

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And He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword should sell his garment and buy one. For I tell you that this which is written must be completed in Me, 'And He was numbered with transgressors'; for that which refers to Me has its completion." And they said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough." (Luke 22:36-38)

Throughout His ministry, Jesus never publicly identified Himself as the Son of God or the Christ (except in very private instances). Jesus prevented demons from identifying Him as the Christ (Luke 4:41) and warned the disciples not to tell anyone He was the Christ (Matt 16:16-20; Mark 8:29-30; Luke 9:20-21). However, in His trial before Jewish religious authorities, Jesus publicly associates Himself with the Son of God.

And the high priest stood up and said to Him, "Do You not answer? What are these men testifying against You?" But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I put You under oath by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You yourself said it; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his garments and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?" They answered and said, "He deserves death!" (Matt 26:62-66)

"If You are the Christ, tell us." But He said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask a question, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." And they all said, "Are You the Son of God, then?" And He said to them, "You yourselves say that I am." (Luke 22:67-70)

Fully aware of what His role was in His Father's plan (Matt 26:36-42; Mark 14:32-39; Luke 22:41-44), Jesus was to die for mankind's sins on a certain day at a certain time to meet God's prescribed method of atonement. Jesus made the claim as Messiah to ensure the death penalty from Jewish religious authorities and meet the correct time of death and to fulfill Messianic prophecies that would confirm that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

What exactly is God's plan for each of us? When understanding the context of Peter's sermon outside the Temple (Acts 3:12-18), you can see how God's plan involves both Believers and non-Believers acting in their own best self interest. After the arrest and release of Peter and John for this event, they return to the other disciples and shared with them all that had taken place. In response, all of the disciples spoke in unison with one mind:

... For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur. ... (Acts 4:27-28)

God somehow foreknows how people will respond to various circumstances and takes this into account in the execution of His plan. Jesus' actions, just before and during His trial, indicate a foreknowledge of how people will freely behave and utilize their actions to make certain of God's plan at the right moment and circumstance in time. Predestine describes this process of God knowing beforehand yet retains the freedom of human action in carrying out His plan exactly.

While no one acted on the basis of any knowledge of God's plan, you can gain a sense as to what God's plan is and how you will have a role in it.

Therefore they said to Him, "What should we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (John 6:28-29)