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THE PURPOSE AND PROGRAM OF THE PROPHETIC WORD*

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THE subject of this study is the purpose and program of prophecy and is suggested by three passages of Scripture. The first is recorded in Rev 4:11: "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor, and power; for Thou hast created all things; and for Thy pleasure they are and were created." Two others are from the book of Ephesians: Eph 1:11: "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will"; and Eph 3:11: "According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The all-consuming purpose of God in the creation of the universe was to establish a kingdom in the earth where he could make a display of his glory in the person of his son. This public exhibition was made to creatures made in his own image and therefore capable of apprehending, appreciating, and applauding his glory.

This eternal purpose centered in Christ Jesus our Lord, who eventually entered the stream of history as the incarnate Son of God. And this eternal God, forever the image of the invisible God, was at last to be brought within the grasp of men by becoming flesh and dwelling among them (John 1:14). "Being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Heb 1:3; Col 2:3), he would lead out and unfold like a teacher all the truth about God (John 1:14).

From the beginning of creation this eternal purpose has been in the process of being realized. Historical and predictive prophecy are the record of this projected accomplishment. Historical prophecy marks out the program through the past and it also declares what is taking place in the present. Predictive prophecy points to the triumph that lies ahead.

In this study I outline briefly the entire span of God's purpose and program, covering the scope of both historical and predictive prophecy.

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GOD'S GLORY IN EDEN

At the outset of creation God placed the cherubim and the infolding fire in the Garden of Eden to display his glory among men. Gen 3:24 reads: "And God placed at the east of the Garden of Eden cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life."

Thus, a representation of God appears in the very beginning of Scripture and centers in the infolding fire appearing between the cherubim at the east of Eden, guarding any approach to the tree of life. The Hebrew of Gen 3:24 seems to say that God caused the cherubim to dwell in this location. They are described in more detail in the first chapter of Ezekiel. Between the cherubim was an infolding fire shooting tongues of fire in every direction which was declared to be the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God (Ezek 1:4, 28).

Revelation and communication of God with men is indicated by this declaration. By reference to the account of the tabernacle and the temple, it appears that God displayed something of his glory in the infolding fire appearing beneath the cherubim and above the mercy seat (cf. Exod 25:8, 22 with Ps 80:1). There God communicated with Adam and perhaps also with his seed, until the time of the flood (Gen 3:8), though we have no information concerning how long this arrangement continued or when it was concluded. But it would appear that the antediluvian saints learned of God in this way. There Abel and Seth and Cain learned about sacrifice and offerings. And finally, Cain turned his back on it, and the Word says, "And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord" (Gen 4:1-15).

But in addition to representation and revelation, there was also in this depiction not mere expulsion from the face of God, but also the method of approach to God. It contained the way of redemption back to God. This infolding fire was above the mercy seat, as described in Exod 25:18. It was here on the day of atonement that the blood was sprinkled and God met with men in redemption. All this pointed forward to that day when the Son of God would make propitiation, he himself being the place or mercy-seat where it was made, and he himself the propitiation (Lev 16:2).

GOD'S GLORY MANIFESTED TO THE PATRIARCHS

During the long period from the flood to Mount Sinai, God made repeated manifestations of his glory to the patriarchs.

God manifested himself to Noah, and Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Gen 6:8). Upon numerous occasions God communicated his will to Noah (Gen 6:13; 7:1; 8:15, 20; 9:8). At last he assured Noah that he would dwell in the tents of Shem (Gen 9:27).

To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God appeared upon numerous occasions and assured them that he would keep his covenant that he had made with them (Gen 50:24). He came to Abraham when he was in a deep sleep, and Abraham saw a smoking furnace and a burning lamp pass between the divided pieces of animals in the making of a covenant (Gen 15:1-18). Here God the Father and God the Son were sealing an unconditional covenant with Abraham. While in flight from Esau one night, Jacob had a dream in which God confirmed the covenant that he had made with Abraham. This had such a tremendous effect upon Jacob that he was convinced that he was in the house of God and had come to the very gate of heaven (Gen 28:10-22). On his return to his homeland, he met with the preincarnate Christ and wrestled with him until the break of day (Gen 32:24-32; Hos 12:4).

To Joseph and to Moses and the children of Israel God exhibited his glory. He met Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:1-6). Through Moses he declared to Israel, "Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live?" (Deut 4:33). The account goes on to say, "And the glory of the Lord abode upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days: and the seventh day he called unto Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel" (Exod 24:16-17).

GOD'S GLORY IN THE TABERNACLE AND TEMPLE

At Sinai and for more than a thousand years thereafter, the glory of God dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple among the children of Israel.

At Sinai Israel was organized into a kingdom with the tabernacle at the center. Moses followed divine instruction and under his leadership the work was finished (Exod 40:33). The Scriptures say that immediately "a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:34-35). For a thousand years this glory appearing above the mercy seat and between the cherubim was the rallying point of revelation and redemption in Israel.

From Sinai to the land of promise, through the entire wilderness, the tabernacle was always at the center of the encampment of Israel. This nation was a theocracy. God was the one who ruled in Israel and Moses was his mouthpiece to the people, but at the center was the glory of the God of Israel. The Scriptures say, "When the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward

in all their journeys: But if the cloud were not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was upon the tabernacle by day, and fire was on it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys" (Exod 40:36-38). The children of Israel were exposed to this display of God's glory throughout those forty long years of wilderness wanderings.

Once the people came into the land, the glory of the Lord continued to abide in the tabernacle until the temple was erected. It was ever in its place over the ark of God above the mercy seat. It was this presence that encouraged the people of Israel in conflict with the enemy. Upon one occasion, when confronting the Philistines, the ark was taken by the enemy, and a woman giving birth to a child named him Ichabod, meaning "The glory of the Lord is departed from Israel" (1 Sam 4:21-22). The calamities that befell the Philistines, because of the presence of the ark, forced them to return it to the Israelites (1 Sam 6:21). Even though the glory of the Lord continued to dwell above the ark, first in the tabernacle and later in the temple, the deteriorating quality of dedication and devotion and the drift into wickedness on the part of the people at last led to the departure of this sacred and wonderful manifestation of the Lord. This event is depicted in the book of Ezekiel: "And the glory of the Lord departed from off the threshold of the house . . . and went up from the midst of the city, and stood on the mountain which is on the east side of the city" (Ezek 10:18, 11:23).

GOD'S GLORY IN THE INCARNATION

In the fullness of time, the glory of God made permanent dwelling in flesh and appeared temporarily on the earth among men.

At this point God's eternal purpose came into focus. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us: and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The one "who is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15)—"For in him dwelleth all the fullness of God bodily" (Col 2:9)—came within the grasp of men. Until this time "no man had seen God at any time; the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath led him out and unfolded him like a teacher" (John 1:18).

By miracle of word and work, he manifested the glory of God (John 2:11). The beginning of miracles, signifying his identity, began in Cana of Galilee when he made the water blush and become wine (John 2:1-11). From a distance he healed a nobleman's son (John 4:46-54). A man afflicted with an infirmity for thirty-eight years, so that he was rendered immobile, was made to walk by a word of authority (John 5:1-9). A teeming multitude of perhaps 15,000 people,

languishing for need of food, was fed from the paltry source of five loaves and two small fish (John 6:1-14). Twelve full baskets remained, a basket-full for every disciple. He walked away from this crowd which was clamoring to make him king, and he came to his disciples, treading upon the boisterous waves of the sea (John 6:15-21). A man blind from birth was given his sight (John 9). A beloved brother dead for four days was raised from the grave (John 11). And above and beyond all this, when he himself had been entombed for three days, he broke through a rock-hewn, sealed tomb, without so much as disturbing a molecule of stone or rearranging the graveclothes in which he had been laid to rest. In the course of his ministry, all of this was crowned by miracles of word which mystified and mortified the people and the officials of Israel.

But the fullness of his glory was veiled. That glory which he had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5), was laid aside when he became flesh, not in the sense that he became anything less than God, or had given up any attribute of God—for he was still essentially God, possessing every attribute of God—but only in the sense that he gave up the independent exercise of those attributes. He emptied himself. He gave up his reputation and he took the form of a servant, so that he was completely under the direction of the Father. Every motion he performed, and every word he spoke was authorized and directed by the Father (John 5:36, 8:28, 12:49-50). Only those eyes that were touched by the Spirit of God were able to see God manifest in flesh. "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). Nevertheless, here is the token that someday he will come again and establish that kingdom where his glory will be seen and acknowledged by all.

GOD'S GLORY IN THE CHURCH

In the person of the Spirit, the Son of God manifested his glory in a new society of believers called the Church.

The departure of Christ did not interrupt the purpose of God. It merely marked a transition to a new phase in the fulfillment of that purpose. With the coming of the Spirit on the day of pentecost, Christ took up his dwelling in that mystical body, the Church (John 14:16-17, 16:7). Therefore, his going did not leave them orphans (John 14:18), for he would be living in them (John 14:19-20), and in this sense the triune God would make the Church an eternal habitation (John 14:21-23). This tabernacle would take its place finally in the eternal state to display subjectively the excellencies of God (Eph 2:7; Rev 21:3). Christ had already imparted to the Church the glory which the Father had given him, for he said, "the glory which thou gavest me, I have given them" (John 17:22). Believers have become epistles

of Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart (2 Cor 3:3). And so the Apostle Paul said, "Shall not the ministration of the spirit be with glory?" (2 Cor 3:8). "For we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are being changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18).

However, the glory of Christ as exhibited in the Church is not recognized by the world. The love that the Father has bestowed on believers, so that they are not only called but actually are the children of God, produces no positive response from the world. "The world knoweth us not, because it knew him not" (1 John 3:1). The gospel is hidden to those that are lost. The god of this world brings his own influence to bear on the minds of men, so that those who believe not are blinded, "lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor 4:4). Even though the world does not recognize or appreciate the ministry of the Church in displaying the glory of Christ, believers are urged to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them both to will and to do of his good pleasure. And it is still true that they shine as lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation (Phil 2:12-15).

However, this glory of Christ as displayed in the church is recognized and received by the chosen of the Lord. "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Believers have not yet reached the point of perfection. "It does not yet appear what we shall be. But we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Believers are progressively being transformed into the same image, from one state of glory into another, so that at last the great work of Christ will be completed when we shall be conformed to the image of his Son (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). In this fact there is not only the display of the glory of God but also the method for reaching others who belong to the chosen of God but who have not yet made a profession of faith. Therefore, the Apostle Peter exhorts us "to show forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

GOD'S GLORY IN THE SECOND COMING

At the second coming of Christ, the Son of God will come in his glory to sit upon the throne of his glory, and the whole earth will shine with his glory. This period will be ushered in by the coming of Christ in glory (Matt 24:27-30) as is often stated in the NT. This

means that there will be public exhibition of his divine attributes. His appearing will be sudden, instantaneous, catastrophic. His coming will be personal, visible, bodily, in power, and unexpected. Every eye shall see him (Rev. 1:7). Every tribe shall mourn (Matt 24:30). Every government shall crumble (Dan 2:34-35, 44). The Antichrist, then at the peak of his power, will be smitten with the sword of his almighty word and the armies under his direction shall be slain. Antichrist and the false prophet will be immediately cast into the lake of fire and Satan will be consigned to the bottomless pit for a thousand years.

That period will continue with the exercise of authority from the throne of his glory (Matt 25:31). The throne signifies the area of authority and the authority will be the exercise of his attributes. The entire period will be characterized by the progressive subjugation of all enemies: "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25). To assist him, he will commit to the perfected spiritual nobility (the Church, the OT saints, and the tribulation martyrs) the responsibility of ruling and reigning with him (Rev 20:6, 4; Dan 7:22). Politically, there will follow the judgment of living Israel (Ezek 20:33-38) and the Gentile nations (Matt 25:31-46). Saved Israel will enter the kingdom, and the rebels will suffer death. Saved Gentile nations will enter the kingdom, and the lost will be confined in Hades to await the great white throne judgment. Spiritually, true worship will be restored and compelled. All nations will come to Jerusalem to worship the king, the Lord Jesus Christ (Zech 14:16-19). Physically, there will be changes in the surface of the earth, and the curse will be partially lifted (Zech 14:4, 10; Isa 30:23-26; 32:13-15; 33:24; 35:5-6; 65:21-25; 11:6-8).

The period concludes with the whole earth shining with his glory. You can read that statement in Ezek 43:2. The millennial temple is filled with the glory of the Lord in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The emanation of that glory, as it reaches the far corners of the earth, causes the whole earth to shine with his glory. There is no aspect or detail of life that is not touched by this sacred presence. The lifting of restrictions on conduct and the release of Satan from his prison at the end of the millennium develop into a final rebellion which is cut short by divine wrath and results in the death of all wicked men and the casting of Satan into the lake of fire forever (Rev 20:7-10). Then comes the final discharge from the throne of God. It takes on all the awe-inspiring aspects of the holiness of God. There is no color to relieve the unrelenting whiteness of that throne. There final judgment is meted out upon all the wicked for their deeds (Rev 20:11-15). The kingdom will have reached its completion and perfection, and Christ will deliver it into the hands of the Father (1 Cor 15:24-28). Reconstruction of the physical environment then prepares the way for the perfect kingdom (Rev 21:1).

GOD'S GLORY IN THE ETERNAL STATE

At last the supreme purpose of God will be realized when Christ is established as the temple and the center of illumination for the eternal state. Note four aspects of Christ's centrality.

First, at the *highest spiritual level*, Christ will serve as the temple during the eternal state. Rev 21:22 says that there will be no temple, which is a way of saying that there will be no building, the inner sanctuary of which will provide a place for the image of God. Among pagan Gentile nations, they always placed in the inner sanctuary an image of their god. In Jerusalem it was the place where the Shekinah glory manifested itself above the mercy seat and beneath the wings of the cherubim. This glory was seen only by the high priest once a year. But now the sacred sanctuary will be the person of our Lord Jesus. Once the glory was hidden, now it will be public and open to the gaze of all the people of the kingdom, and this will elicit the most profound admiration, adoration, and adulation. Where in all the ages preceding, there was a disunity among men because they were unable to see the unity in that person whom they worshiped, now, at last, there will be a perfect unification of all men. They will be looking at the very God whom they worship.

Second, at the *highest level of experience*, the glory of God in Christ will serve as the center of illumination for the new Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings (Rev 21:23). Even though the sun and the moon and the stars will continue to perform their functions, a new center of light will serve as a lamp for this city. The radiance streaming from the face of our blessed Lord and comprising the glory of God, will give light perpetually. This light will exceed that of the midday sun, or that of the reflected light of the moon, and will cause those luminaries to fade into insignificance. If perchance the laws of physics provide for this light to reach around the earth to every country and region, then all the inhabitants of the eternal state will bask in this supernatural radiance. But even if that were not so, at least all people shall see it, for they will make perpetual pilgrimage to the Holy City (Rev 21:24-26).

Third, at the *highest level of authority*, the throne of God and of the Lamb will be the center of this kingdom (Rev 22:1, 3). From this point on there will be no question as to the place and source of authority. The grace of God in Christ will have brought all the inhabitants of the kingdom to their knees in willing servitude, and they will all serve him in worship in whatever aspect or area of occupation (Rev 22:3). It is not accidental that this throne is described as the throne of the Lamb. That turns the attention of every heart and mind back to Calvary. It was there that the highest and most important event of the eternities took place. It is that aspect of the

glory of God that confirmed the holiness of God and provided propitiation for every citizen in the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Fourth, at the *highest level of apprehension*, the inhabitants of this kingdom will see his face (Rev 22:4). The word "face" indicates that which confronts the eye. It is that portion of the anatomy that fascinates and transfixes the beholder. It is that aspect of being that is the index to all else in a person. It is that detail of Christ that not only provided progressive transformation during all the years prior to the eternal state (2 Cor 3:18), but it is also that detail that will confirm forever the fixation of divine nature so that his name and all it represents will appear in the foreheads of all his devotees. This qualifies them to rule and reign in whatever capacity he delegates to them (Rev 22:5).

CONCLUSION

The grand sweep in the purpose of God will have then reached its final conclusion. It exceeds the wildest dreams of men. It reaches beyond anything that any saint can ask or think (Eph 3:20). "O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out. . . . For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen!" (Rom 11:33, 36). "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).