

Seeing It God's Way: What Is God Like?

By Robertson McQuilkin

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

How does one see the world from God's viewpoint? It would be difficult to find a better vantage point than this familiar summary of what the Bible is about. Standing at this overlook we can see what God is like, what God is up to, what God has done, and what God has said. Any one of these should open wide the shutters of our minds to see the world from God's perspective. In combination the vision is clear and sharp – and overwhelming.

We begin here because God's purpose, activities, and all that He says flow from what He is.

Certainly God is powerful. The most primitive tribesman, isolated in the jungles of some remote island, cowers before the overwhelming forces of nature and recognizes the power of the unseen. Yet the most educated and influential Christian on his knees also recognizes how helpless and hopeless he would be without the power of an infinite God.

Of course, God is wise. Yet Satan, though no match for God, is powerful and wise beyond our knowing. In the hands of evil, how terrifying and monstrous are authority and power coupled with great intelligence. The difference is that God is more than powerful and wise: He is just and righteous.

When I contemplate my own miserable sinfulness, a powerful, wise, and holy God of justice who gives me what I deserve would be the ultimate terror. Thank God the Evangelist could write the exhilarating, liberating announcement: "God so loved ..." The loving character of God makes the salvation of alienated people the primary focus of His attention.

What Is God Up To?

"Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever," the Westminster Shorter Catechism assures us. As a summary of a human being's proper view of reality, this statement is illuminating and authentic. But how does man fulfill this chief end? Surely by adoring and worshipping his Creator; certainly by obedience, as one is recreated by the Spirit after the moral pattern of God Himself; indeed through the building up of God's church. But the human event that brings greatest glory to God and satisfaction to His heart occurs when a prodigal returns home, when one immigrates out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son. Human redemption is the focal point of God's purpose in this world.

Redemption, above all else, is what God is up to. From the Garden of Eden, where He sought the miserable Adam and Eve and promised the triumph of the coming Messiah (Genesis 3:15), down through the ages to the consummation when He welcomes home His bride gathered from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Revelation 5:9, 10; 19:7), our God, with single-minded determination, is seeking the lost. He is not willing that any should perish. His character and work are spotlighted by glorious fulfillment when "... whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

What Has God Done?

Folk wisdom has it that actions thunder so loudly about one's character and true intent that feeble words of explanation cannot be heard. What do God's activities demonstrate of His loving character and purpose of world redemption? It is not too much to affirm that every major act of God since creation has been a missionary act.

Even creation does not focus on the intricacies of the atom nor climax with infinite galaxies. The crescendo builds to a climax in the creation of a being in the likeness of God Himself. This was the overflow of a love which bound the Three in a unity from all eternity. God's desire was to create a being who would have the capacity to fully receive His love and, in turn, to love Him freely and fully. This very likeness to God, the freedom from coerced or programmed choices, set the stage for man's rebellion and alienation. Man changed but God did not. And thus His purpose shifted from loving companionship with humankind to recreating the broken pattern of God-likeness so that the loving identity of life could be restored. Thus the sacrificial system, the calling of a special people, the redemption from Egypt, and the giving of the Law all centered in redeeming and restoring.

When God chose to communicate with man in written form, His purpose was the same. The Bible is not a revelation of all of God's activities or purposes from eternity. It is not a record of all human antiquity. It is the story of redemption, climaxing in the greatest event in human history, the Incarnation. This invasion of human life by God Himself was deliberately designed from all eternity, we are told, to provide redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These events, more than anything else Scripture tells us, reveal the purpose and character of God: love reaching out to save hopelessly lost people. What has God done? "God so loved ... that He gave His one and only Son..." This act of love goes beyond all human comprehension. What could reveal with greater clarity God's character and purpose? What could demonstrate more forcibly the center and circumference of His attention?

The next major event, Pentecost, was the descent of the Holy Spirit to establish the church, to be sure. But the purpose was clear. The entire record of the early church reveals how the apostles viewed the primary purpose of the church toward the world. It was to be God's instrument for world evangelization.

Indeed, it is not too much to say that every major activity of God among men since the Fall has been a saving, missionary act.

What Has God Said?

No matter what the folk wisdom may say, words are not feeble. In fact, words are essential to accurately interpret activity and to fully reveal what is going on in one's mind. God is mysterious and His infinities are far beyond our probing. But He is not a silent God. We can know Him because He has spoken; He has revealed Himself and His will.

We are told that the God of the Old Testament is a narrow-minded, tribal deity. Is this the portrait that Moses draws? Listen to Moses' report of the call of the first selected and segregated person: The Lord has said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Far from being a narrow-minded tribal deity, from the beginning God was revealed as purposing blessing for the whole world. Did Abraham's descendants lose sight of this? They might have, but God reminded them repeatedly. To Abraham's son Isaac, God renewed the covenant and kept His intentions in focus "...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed ..." (Genesis 26:4). Isaac's son, Jacob, might certainly be described as a narrow-minded person of considerable self-interest. But to Jacob also, God clarified His intent: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (Genesis 28:14).

The chosen people never forgot that they were chosen. Listen to David in his great celebration of God when the ark was brought to Jerusalem.

He remembers His covenant forever, the word He commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant He made with Abraham, the oath He swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit." When they were but few in number, few indeed, and strangers in it, they wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another. He allowed no man to oppress them; for their sake He rebuked kings: "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm" (1 Chronicles 16:15-22).

Surely David, like all the chosen people, clearly remembered God's promises to Abraham and the patriarchs.

Often, they forgot God's worldwide purpose through them. But not David:

Give thanks to the LORD, all the earth; proclaim His salvation day after day. Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength, tremble before Him, all the earth! The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!" (1 Chronicles 16:8, 23-24, 28, 30-31).

The psalmist leads us in what must surely be our daily prayer: "May God be gracious to us and bless us" (Psalm 67:1). How hopeless we would be if we received what we justly deserved, so we plead for mercy. We pray, "God bless my work, God bless my health, God bless my family, God bless my church." The psalmist adds, "and make His face shine upon us." If God mercifully forgave us, received us, and graciously prospered us but did not smile on us, assuring us of His favor, what a bleak life we would have. So we rightly ask for God to forgive our sins, bless our affairs, and lovingly companion with us, but why? The psalmist continues:

"that Thy way be known upon earth, Thy saving power among all nations." (RSV) How could the ancient songwriter of Israel declare more clearly His own missionary purpose in total alignment with the purpose of His missionary God?

All this revelation of God's purpose of world redemption was gathered up in the magnificent declarations of the prophet Isaiah:

"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22). "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

I have held Great Commission Workshops with the leadership of many churches, all of which have a strong missions interest. As we examine the biblical basis of missions I have come to expect very little understanding of what the Old Testament has revealed concerning a God who loves the world and from the beginning has actively pursued world redemption.

Pastors, church leaders, and missions committee members in churches with active missions programs do not know what God has said from the beginning concerning His worldwide intent. I thought that if world missions in the Old Testament is so little understood, perhaps missionary fervor is built on a thorough understanding of New Testament teaching. But in virtually every church, the leadership can recall little world vision in the New Testament prior to the Cross, and has consistently affirmed that the Great Commission was given only on one or two occasions.

Yet Jesus Christ clearly revealed His world wide intent before Calvary, even when His own primary mission was to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." At the beginning of His ministry we are told, "God so loved the world ... that whoever ..." (John 3:16); and at the end of his ministry He said, "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony ..." (Matthew 24:14).

Jesus Christ came back to this theme repeatedly on virtually every appearance following His resurrection He met with the frightened band of disciples and gave them the motive for their mission: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). At His command they went north to Galilee, and there He met them and gave them the model for their mission vision:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

The disciples returned then to Jerusalem. I see the events recorded in the last verses of Luke 24 as taking place at this time rather than before they went to Galilee. Here Christ gave His disciples the message of their mission, showing them in the Old Testament how it was prophesied: "and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:47-48).

Our Lord then went with the disciples out toward Bethany to the Mount of Olives. They were still thinking of a political mission of restructuring a very unjust society, and inquired about the timing of Christ's earthly conquest.

Our Lord came back to the same theme, giving the method of their mission.

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:7-8).

We do not know the occasion of the most famous Great Commission recorded in Mark 16:15, but it may well have been yet a fifth occasion following Christ's resurrection in which world evangelization is expressed as the will of God. "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." (KJV)

If a person is minded to question that this was the clear statement of the will of God, all he need do is examine the interpretation put on these commands by those who were present and heard Him. The disciples who heard these words left us thirty years of action demonstration how they understood it, and the Holy Spirit considered it important enough to leave a book documenting that interpretation. World evangelization is indeed the expressed will of God.

This, then, is the biblical basis for missions: World evangelization is the expressed will of God. Spiritual redemption is the demonstrated activity of God.

Evangelism and redemptive activity are expressed as the will of God and the demonstrated activity of God because it is the nature of God so to will and so to act. Love is the revealed nature of God. The salvation of lost men is that human event which brings greatest glory to God.

Because God is such a God and has given the church such a command, our mandate for action is to make known the good news of life in Christ to every person and to establish a congregation of believers in every place. Until every person as heard with understanding and every community has a witnessing congregation of God's people we may not say to the Father, "It is finished ... the task which you have given, we have accomplished."

Why is it that we are so far from fulfilling God's design in the world? One reason is that we have not opened ourselves to the full force of the missionary message of Scripture. "How come?" Because we don't see well. God gives us so clear a revelation of His character, His purpose, His activity, and His will for us, but it seems that we deliberately wear dark glasses with blinders, focusing in Scripture our own small, self-oriented world. Meanwhile the world God loves is lost. May God open our eyes to see the world in focus as He sees it.

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