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## GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES

Ephesians 1:8b-10

By

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Ephesians, Lesson 6

God's Plan for the Ages  
Ephesians 1:8b-10

"God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Most of us recognize that sentence as the familiar Law One of the Four Spiritual Laws. It is true, of course: God does love you and He has a wonderful plan for your life.

Having said that, however, I must add that *God's actual plan* for your life and *your idea* of God's plan for your life may not be one and the same! Your idea of God's wonderful plan for your life may be a comfortable home in the suburbs, a good job, a happy, healthy family, and a good church where you have many Christian friends. God's *actual* wonderful plan may include financial pressures, a difficult marriage, a debilitating illness, children who rebel, or other unforeseen trials.

Or, God's *actual* wonderful plan may be that you move to a difficult part of the world that is entrenched in a non-Christian religion, to take the gospel to these people. You will have to learn a difficult language and adapt to a strange culture. You may have to endure corrupt and ineffective government, daily power outages, undrinkable water, pollution, the lack of modern medical facilities, and opposition from the local people. You will face the difficulty of rearing and educating your children in a non-western culture. And, although you are serving God in a difficult situation, you and your family are not exempt from disease and other trials.

Also, you may be plagued by a lack of adequate support from the comfy Christians back in the homeland, who are enjoying all of the latest gadgets and conveniences that the American dream provides. While they are building equity in their homes and retirement portfolios so that they can cruise America's National Parks in their RV's, you will not own a home or have a retirement portfolio of any substance. This may be God's *actual* wonderful plan for your life! Although it may not sound inviting, in truth you will enjoy God's true blessing, because you are living your life in light of His eternal plan for the ages.

The apostle Paul is enumerating some of the spiritual blessings that God has graciously bestowed on us in Jesus Christ. He has mentioned God's choosing us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him (1:4). He tells us that in love, God predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will (1:5). He says that in Christ, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us (1:7).

Some scholars link the next phrase, "in all wisdom and insight," with the preceding phrase, meaning that God gave us wisdom and insight to understand our redemption and forgiveness. Or, it may (as in the NASB) point ahead to the next blessing, that God has given us wisdom and insight to understand the mystery of His will, or His plan for the ages. In 1:8b-10, Paul's message and its application are,

Because God's plan for the ages is to sum up all things under Christ, we should submit ourselves to Jesus as Lord.

Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* is phenomenally popular, and as long as you understand it properly, from God's perspective, the message is valid. If you tweak the message into an Americanized version, where you *use God* to help you reach *your* goals, you have perverted the biblical message. But, if you understand that God's purpose is to be glorified through your submitting all of your life to the lordship of Jesus, then the message is valid. If you want your few years on this earth to count for eternity, you must bring your life under Christ's lordship and in line with God's purpose for the ages, which is to bring all things into one harmonious whole under Jesus Christ as Lord. Note four things:

1. God has a plan for the ages.

It is only reasonable that an all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful God would have a comprehensive plan for the world that He spoke into existence and that He would have the ability to carry out that plan.

- A. God has a plan and He has the ability to carry it out.

Many Scriptures affirm this evident truth. For example, Job 42:2 declares, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted."

Psalms 103:19 rejoices that, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all."

Psalms 115:3 states, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

In Isaiah 46:9-10, God declares, "For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'"

In Daniel 4:34-35, the humbled Nebuchadnezzar blesses, praises, and honors the Most High, who lives forever, "For His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'"

Or, as Paul comprehensively states in Ephesians 1:11, we have "been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will."

Some deny that God is sovereign over all that happens, because they think that it would make Him the author of evil. But, the Bible is clear that God decreed beforehand what will happen in history, including such evil events as the crucifixion of Christ (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28) and the rise of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:8-10; Rev. 13). Yet, at the same time, God is not the author of evil or responsible for it (1 John 1:5). God declares (Isa. 45:7) that He is "the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these." Or, Amos 3:6 asks rhetorically, "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?" God declares to the prophet Habakkuk that He is raising up the evil Chaldeans to discipline His people Israel. In that context, the prophet rightly declares of God (Hab. 1:13), "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor." God is sovereign even over evil, yet He is not the

author of evil and is not responsible for it. The Bible is clear that He has a plan and He can and will carry it out.

B. God's plan is according to His own good pleasure.

Paul states (Eph. 1:9) that God's will is "according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him." "Kind intention" is a single Greek word that means "good pleasure" (the same word is in 1:5). Jesus used this word in Luke 10:21, when He said, "I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight." It refers to the fact that God does what He does simply because it pleases Him to do so. In other words, He does not determine His plan based upon anything outside of Himself. He did not look down through the corridors of time and then make up His plan after He saw who would choose Him. He did not base His choice on any merit or worthiness that He foresaw in us.

John Calvin (*Sermons on Ephesians* [Banner of Truth, 1973], p. 58) points out that Paul uses this word to "put away and shut out all opinion which men might conceive of their own worthiness." Then he adds, "For God's good pleasure can have no place unless men are barred from all deserving and come to him utterly empty." So, God's plan to save us (which is Paul's subject in the context here) is totally because of His grace and good pleasure.

C. God carries out His plan according to His sovereign timetable.

Paul says (1:10) that God's purpose is "with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times..." "Administration" (New KJV = "dispensation") here refers to God's "comprehensive arrangement and administration of [His] plan according to ... [His] decree" (John Grassmick, unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary). "The picture is that of a great household of which God is Master and which has an orderly system of management controlled by Him." It means that "God orders everything in its full time and in sovereign wisdom orders the time of all things" (*ibid.*).

Paul uses a similar phrase in Galatians 4:4-5 with reference to the incarnation: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent

forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons." In other words, God brought the Savior into the world in His perfect timetable. He promised to send a Savior to Adam and Eve after they fell into sin (Gen. 3:15). But at least 2,000 years went by before God chose to call Abraham out of Mesopotamia. God promised to give Abraham a son and the land and to bless the nations through His descendant, Jesus Christ.

But, Abraham's descendants had to spend 400 years in captivity in Egypt, while the world waited for the Savior. Then there was about 1,000 years of Israel's mostly disobedient history, including the Babylonian captivity. There were 400 more silent years, with no prophetic word from God. Finally, at least 4,000 years after Adam and 2,000 years after Abraham, God sent His Son into this world.

Was God late? Perish the thought! Although we may wonder why God waited so long, while millions of people down through the centuries died in their sins, God sent His Son at precisely the right moment, from His divine plan. He is in charge of the events of history, and no evil tyrant or disobedient nation can thwart God's plan.

This truth gives us encouragement and hope, especially when we see frightening international events unfolding, such as the threat of militant Islamic terrorists who are determined to destroy our nation. It also applies to our individual history, when tragedies hit or things seem to be spinning out of control. God is still in charge and He does not allow anything to disrupt His sovereign plan.

2. God has graciously given us wisdom and insight to know His plan for the ages.

"All wisdom and insight" (1:8b) refers to the wisdom and insight that God has graciously given to us so that we can know "the mystery of His will." We need to understand several terms. *Wisdom* is a general term that refers to understanding the true nature of things, whereas *insight* refers to practical discernment that results in right action in daily life. In the context here, the idea is that God has given us the wisdom we need to apprehend His gracious eternal plan of salvation and the practical outworking of it in our daily lives. William Barclay put it (cited by Grassmick, *ibid.*), "Christ

gives to men the ability to see the great ultimate truths of eternity and to solve the problems of each moment of time.”

Paul says (1:9) that God “made known to us the mystery of His will....” *Mystery* does not refer to a closely guarded secret that only those in the secret inner circle understand. (It was used in this way in the “mystery” religions of the first century.) Nor does it refer to something vague, nebulous, and indefinite. Rather, it means something that was previously unknown, but now has been revealed. God has graciously revealed to us what we never could have figured out by ourselves, namely, His sovereign will or plan for the ages, to sum up everything in Christ.

Paul uses this idea of God revealing the mystery of His will, in other places. In Romans 16:25-26, he writes, “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested ....” Or, in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world, through which they could not come to know God, with the wisdom of God as displayed at the cross. Then, in 2:6-7, he explains, “Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory.” He goes on to explain how God has to reveal this wisdom to us, because the natural man is incapable of understanding it (2:14).

Even though God has given us wisdom and insight into the mystery of His will, such wisdom and insight is not automatic! We have to study the Scriptures diligently, asking God to give us such wisdom and insight, so that we might walk in His ways. As Proverbs (2:2-4) tells us, we must seek for wisdom as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures.

Thus, God has a plan for the ages and He has graciously given us wisdom and insight to know this plan.

3. God’s plan for the ages is to sum up all things under Jesus Christ as Lord.

The Greek verb translated “summing up” means to bring together or to gather up in one. It implies that things were before in

disharmony or disarray (because of the fall), but now they will be brought together in unity. Sam Storms explains (<http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/17-14>), "The idea is that the discordant and disintegrating elements in the creative realm will be renewed and unified under the Lordship of Jesus. Everything will be brought into submission to his will and subservience to his glory." The Greek scholar, J. B. Lightfoot concludes (*Notes on Epistles of St. Paul* [Baker, 1980 reprint], ed. by J. R. Harmer, p. 322), "Thus the expression implies the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ."

Paul explains "all things" by adding, "things in the heavens and things on the earth." This is a figure of speech that expresses comprehensiveness. It includes the restoration of the fallen creation (Rom. 8:18-23); the salvation and perfect sanctification of all of God's elect (Eph. 1:4); and, eternal rest from conflict for the elect angels (1 Tim. 5:21), whose ministry to us engages them in battle with the forces of Satan (Daniel 10:12-13; Rev. 12:7-9).

God's summing up all things in Christ (reconciling all things to Himself in Col. 1:20) does *not* mean, as some erroneously teach, that eventually everyone (including Satan!) will be saved! The Bible is clear that Satan and his evil demonic forces, will be forever subdued and confined to the lake of fire, along with all who die without believing in Christ (Rev. 20:11-15). But, every knee will someday bow before Jesus and acknowledge Him as Lord, either willingly or forcibly (Phil. 2:9-11).

Paul will go on (in Eph. 2 & 3) to emphasize that the church is now the prototype of God's ultimate plan of reunification. Specifically, the mystery that God has now revealed is that the Jews and the Gentiles (who were about as discordant groups as you could find!) are now fellow members of the one body of Christ (see 3:4-6). Thus in chapter 4, he emphasizes strongly the need for practical, demonstrable love and unity in the church.

But here he is laying the theological foundation for such behavior, namely, that the church is the first glimpse of what God ultimately plans to do. His plan for the ages is to reunite in Christ everything that has been torn apart and alienated through sin.

There will be no strife or rivalry or selfishness or jealousy or tyranny of one person over another in the future kingdom of Christ. While we wait for that great day, we must labor to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). The bottom line of Paul's theology here is:

4. When we understand God's eternal purpose, it will lead us to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord of all.

If all things will be subject one day to Jesus Christ as Lord and if all of His subjects will dwell together in the unhindered harmony of heaven, then it follows that we now should bring every area of our lives and every relationship under His sovereign lordship. God has told us that His plan for the ages is to sum up or reunite all things in one harmonious whole under Jesus Christ. We know that God will do as He purposes to do. It is certain that He will accomplish all His good pleasure (Isa. 46:10). Every knee will bow before Jesus as Lord, either willingly or under force. It is far better to bow willingly now than to bow under force at the judgment, when there will be no chance for repentance!

To submit to Jesus as Lord begins with your *thought life*. You must be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:1-2). When sinful thoughts pop into your mind, you must turn from them and enthrone Jesus as Lord. As Paul puts it (Rom. 13:13-14), "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." Behavior always comes from the heart (Mark 7:21-23), so you must begin there.

Submitting to Jesus as Lord also requires that you bring your *priorities and values* in line with His Word. He commanded us (Matt. 6:33), "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." In the context, "all these things" refers to the things that unbelievers eagerly seek, especially material things. How we manage the money that the Lord entrusts to us is a litmus test of our faithfulness to the Lord (Luke 16:10-13).

Enthroning Jesus as Lord also means that we bring our *schedules* under His lordship. We all are given a certain amount of time on this earth. Many hours each day are taken up with necessary

activities, such as sleeping, eating, personal grooming, and work. But, how do we spend the other hours? Do we make spending time alone with God a priority? Do we hunger and thirst to know Him? Or, do we fritter it away with useless pastimes?

Living under Christ's lordship also means that we order our *relationships* according to His Word. We must learn truly to love others, even as He has loved us. We must speak kindly to one another. We must put away selfishness and strife. As Paul wrote (Col. 3:12-14), "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."

### Conclusion

Suppose that you were out of the country and had no access to news during the World Series. Since we're supposing things, let's also suppose that the Arizona Diamondbacks were in the series and that they had defeated the Boston Red Sox. I had watched the series and videotaped it.

When you returned, I said to you, "Let's watch the series, but before we do, let's make a friendly wager. I'll give you 10-1 odds that the Diamondbacks will beat the Red Sox." You'd be a fool to put any money on the Red Sox in such a bet. Why? Because the outcome is certain and I know the outcome!

The outcome of history is certain and God has revealed it to us in advance. He is going to sum up all things under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Knowing that outcome, you'd be a fool to bet your life on anything else. God wants each of us to submit now to Jesus as Lord and to spend our lives furthering His kingdom purposes. In light of His revealed sovereign purpose, that's the only wise way to invest your life!

## Application Questions

1. Some (who claim to be Christian) argue that if God's plan is fixed, it denies our "free will." Thus, they deny that God has ordained all things. How would you answer them?
2. The same (professing) Christians argue that God "never forces the will" of anyone. Thus, salvation depends on the will of the sinner, not on the power of God. Your answer?
3. Some argue that to preach Jesus as Lord for salvation is to confuse faith and works, thus muddying the free gospel offer. Your response?
4. Why is understanding God's eternal plan foundational for a life of holiness and fruitfulness?

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