

25 November 2007

## “God’s Mega-Plan”

Reading: Luke 20:9-19

Some of us will remember the ‘A-Team.’

It was great escapism. Others may have been too intelligent or too spiritual to watch these action-packed episodes of sheer escapism. The show ran on the NBC network for four years. For those who are too young to know about it, this was an action adventure series featuring an eccentric team of ex-United States Army Special Forces. They accepted assignments on behalf of ‘good guys’ who were being oppressed or exploited. They improvised, manufacturing weapons out of everything from bits of scrap metal to chewing gum. And, no matter how well-armed their opponents were, they always won. Remember them (PowerPoint): “Faceman” Peck, “Howling Mad” Murdock, B. A. (Bad Attitude) Baracus, and in the front, their commander, Col “Hannibal” Smith. I don’t think anyone ever got killed, but there were explosions aplenty.

They say confession is good for the soul. I must confess that I enjoyed the ‘A-Team’ and occasionally I used to watch it—like once a week. But I didn’t put that on my resume. So here I am and it’s too late to reconsider.

The show’s most famous line was the statement made by Col. “Hannibal” Smith, at the conclusion of each major fracas. He would nonchalantly light up his cigar and say: “I love it when a plan comes together.”

As some might have seen from the study notes the original title for this sermon was “**The Ultimate Crime.**” That’s because the parable *does* tell us of humanity’s ultimate crime. But I have changed the title to “**God’s Mega-Plan**” for an important reason. As we consider this remarkable parable, we shall be placing it in its widest possible context. And we shall come to see that what could have been the *saddest* of Jesus’ parables (paradoxically) turns out to be one of the *most encouraging*.

So, moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, I am going to adapt Hannibal Smith’s catchphrase: “I love it when *the* plan comes together.” The ultimate plan, the mega-plan came together in a way we would not have anticipated. We are in the extremely fortunate position of being able to see what prophets and kings could not see. More than that, we are the great beneficiaries of this magnificent mega-plan. When Paul had placed God’s mega-plan in perspective for the Christians at Rome, he stood back in awe and said:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and

knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?"  
"Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?"  
For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen  
(Rom 11:33-36).

Peter tells us that the angels long to look in to these things (1 Pet 1:10-12). According to Ephesians 3, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms stand aghast as they see what God had in mind all along (Eph3:10). But let me not get ahead of myself.

## **I. [THE PARABLE]: AT FIRST SIGHT IT LOOKS AS THOUGH A PLAN WENT AWRY.**

Things seem to have gone horribly wrong.

### **A. The Build-up**

It is the last week of Jesus' life on earth. The simmering conflict between him and the religious establishment has now reached boiling point. He has entered the city in fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy, to loud cries of "Hosanna" (Zech 9:9; Mark 11:9-11; Luke 19:37-40). He has driven the traders from the temple. The gloves are off and the members of the Sanhedrin insist that he tell them on whose authority he is teaching and acting. It is into this tense situation that he injects his most provocative parable.

### **B. The Story**

The setting for the parable was familiar enough. In the Jordan Valley there were vast estates owned by foreigners or wealthy Jews who were abroad. They committed the care of their farms and vineyards to tenants, who enjoyed a large measure of independence. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, providing a livelihood for the tenants who could otherwise not have afforded an estate and producing 'dividends' for the distant owners.

At harvest time, one of these owners followed the usual practice, sending a servant to collect the portion of the vintage which belonged to him according to the contract they had signed. So far, so good! But the story takes an unexpected twist. Shock # 1: The unheard-of happens. The tenants not only refuse to pay up but beat the servant and send him away empty-handed. Shock #2: The owner sends another servant and the tenants do exactly the same to him. Shock #3: He sends *yet another* servant and they treat him even more shamefully.

This is a pretty persistent owner and clearly the tenants are not getting the message: *the owner will not be denied*. But he's far away and he intends to be gone for a long time and they can overpower any servant he happens to send. I often try to imagine myself as part of Jesus' initial audience, attempting to hear the parable as they heard it. The brazenness of the tenants must have seemed outrageous to the hearers. I can hear the crowd gasping at the audacity and violence of the tenants.

The parable is full of shocks, but the biggest shock has yet to come. Shock #4: The owner does the *unthinkable*. He sends his (only) son, whom he loves, reasoning that perhaps they will respect him. (We may well question the wisdom of such action--that's part of the power of the parable). True to type, the tenants decide on a course of action. Perhaps they assume that the father has died. One way or the other, they reason that if they eliminate the son, who is the heir, the vineyard will be theirs. So they throw him out of the vineyard and kill him. *Incredible!*

But the parable is not over. Jesus asks: "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?" The answer is clear: "He will come, kill the tenants and give the vineyard to others."

### C. The reaction

Apparently, the people sensed that the story was about the forfeiture of their privilege, God's judgment on those who had been entrusted with the vineyard and, worst of all, the handing over of the vineyard to others. So they protested: "God forbid! May this never be!"<sup>1</sup>

Jesus looked directly at them. I can imagine that there was a pregnant pause. Looking them in the eye, he asked, "What then is the meaning of that which is written, 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone (or cornerstone)'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed." He is quoting a passage with which he hearers would be familiar. Psalm 118, which contains the first part of his reference, was recited on feast days (Ps. 118:22). The second part is an allusion to Isaiah 8:14, 15 (See also Isa. 28:16; Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:6-8).

So incensed were the members of the Sanhedrin that they looked for a way to arrest him immediately. They knew that he had spoken this parable against them. But they were afraid of the people. The tension mounts.

### D. The Meaning

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<sup>1</sup> "May this never be," could refer to the entire parable but is more likely to be a response especially to the last statement: "He will come and kill those tenants *and give their vineyard to others.*" There was sensitivity about any notion of an extension of God's kingdom to Gentiles (Mt 8:10-12; Acts 13:46-52; 22:1-2, 21-22).

1. It is not difficult for us to understand the meaning of the parable. Jesus' opponents knew that they were implicated in a heinous crime. But they did not know that within a few days they would fulfill the prediction in the parable to the letter.
2. God had sent a string of his servants to the nation. On God's behalf, the prophets were asking only what was due to him. But they were rejected and mistreated. Think, for example, of Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos. Stephen's stinging indictment sums up the sad state of affairs: "You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet you did not persecute?" (Acts 7:51-52) But, in spite of this; no, *because* of it, God sends his own Son.
3. But here's the difference: the owner of the vineyard seems unbelievably naïve. If the tenants could treat three of his servants so badly, what made him think they would treat his son any better? On the other hand, *God knew exactly what they would do to his Son, yet he sent him*. And "they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him!"
4. So, it certainly appears that God's plan had gone awry. This *was* the ultimate crime! This surely is the saddest of Jesus' parables. *But no . . .*

## **II. AS WE LOOK MORE DEEPLY AT THE PARABLE, FAR FROM GOD'S PLAN GOING AWRY, WE ACTUALLY SEE IT COMING TOGETHER.**

This is where we have to read specific passages in the light of the big picture revealed to us in the whole of Scripture. God has always had a mega-plan. And here it is--coming together.

### **A. Peter at Pentecost**

Probably the most enlightening comment on this parable is found in the statement Peter made to the huge crowd that gathered on the Day of Pentecost. Listen to God's perspective on the events: "This man (Jesus of Nazareth) was handed over to you *by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge*; and you with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 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: 23-24). In other words, "This was no accident! Yes, there is human culpability. This is mankind's ultimate crime. But this seeming tragedy was God's chosen way to bring salvation to the world. That does not come out from the parable as such, but we have to understand the parable in the light of the rest of Scripture, and it certainly comes out from the rest of Scripture."<sup>2</sup>

Can you see why I changed my title? It *was* our ultimate crime! But that's not where the emphasis of Scripture is. Rather, it is on how God saves his world by coming into

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<sup>2</sup> Isa. 53:10; Mark 8:31; Luke 24:25-27; John 10:17-18; 12:23-28; Acts 2:23-24; 3:17-18; 4:27-28; 13:26-31; 1 Pet 1:18-21.

it and living among us as man and then submitting to the mistreatment of those whom he could have obliterated with a flicker of a thought. This was God's mega-plan, his grand design.

**B. Abraham**

You see, it always was his plan was to bring salvation and blessing to the whole of his creation. That's why he called Abraham, not so that he could love Abraham and hate or ignore everyone else. His plan was that "all peoples on earth (would) be blessed through (Him)" (Gen. 12:3).

**C. A Kingdom of Priests**

At Sinai, God explains that the whole earth is his but that he has chosen Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy (or set-apart) nation (Ex 19:5-6). A priest is someone who stands between God and people (Heb. 5:1-4). Priests don't exist for their own sake; priests exist for the people.

**D. Psalm 67**

This is the perspective of the entire Old Testament. The focus is on Israel but always with the understanding that Israel exists for the nations. Let me cite just one passage that puts this matter in perspective for us:

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us,  
that your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among the nations (Ps. 67:1-2).

**E. Key to Understanding Scripture**

Time does not allow me to develop this thought other than to say that if you don't grasp this, you will never understand Scripture properly. When we stand back and view God's great plan that comes together in Jesus, we are struck by its unity. Yes, it unfolded gradually. There was adequate preparation. There was immaculate timing (John 12:23; 17:1; Gal 4:4). We can only understand the full import of the many predictions when we see the fulfillment of the promised (Eph 3:5-6). But this was not Plan B—an emergency measure because something had gone wrong. This was always Plan A (1 Pet 1:10-12, 18-21).

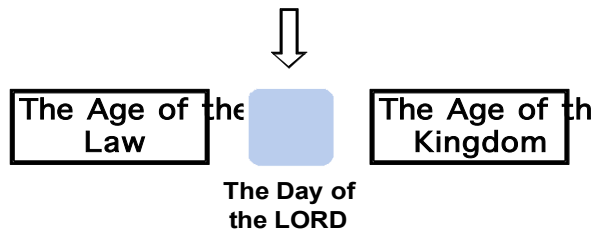
**III.** So, *at first sight it may have looked as if a plan went awry.* The tenants maltreated the servants and murdered the son. But *as we look more deeply at the parable, far from God's plan going awry, we actually see it coming together.* Now we need to see that . . .

**IV. GOD'S MEGA-PLAN IS MORE WONDERFUL THAN ANYONE COULD HAVE IMAGINED.**

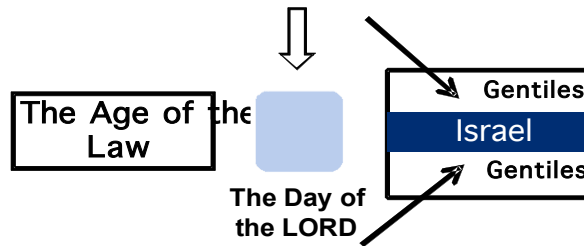
Let me try to give you just a glimpse of it. I can best do this by directing your attention to the PowerPoint presentation.

**A. The Perspective on History at the Time of Jesus**

The common view of history at the time of Jesus was that time is divided into essentially two ages: the age of the Law and the age of the kingdom. Between these two ages comes the Day of the LORD. During the age of the law, Israel will experience God’s chastening because of disobedience. Her enemies will often oppress her. But the day of the LORD is a day of judgment. In the age of God’s kingdom, righteousness and peace reign on earth. Israel is at the center; indeed Jerusalem is the universal capital. A descendant of David sits upon the throne. The Gentiles acknowledge Israel’s God as the only true God. Yes, God’s grace comes to the nations but they are an addendum to Israel.



In reality, the Gentiles are included but Israel is the focus and the Gentiles are present for the sake of Israel. Yes, certain “kingdom benefits” are extended to them, but the kingdom has come to the nation Israel. So, the diagram could be developed as follows:



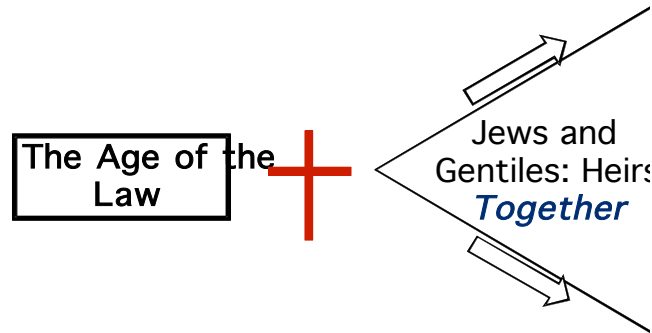
**B. Notice what is Missing**

There is no cross. That means that our most basic problem has not been effectively dealt with. There is no way to introduce the essential features of the New Covenant: we will all know God personally, our sins will not only be forgiven but

completely forgotten by God, we will have an inner desire to obey God and, because God's Spirit is within us, we will have the ability to do so (Jer 31:31-34).

**C. Notice how the Picture Changes**

Instead of the Gentiles sneaking into the kingdom on the shirt-tails of Israel, God brings into being a community comprising people of every tongue and kindred and tribe.



Listen to Paul:

This mystery (something previously unknown) is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs *together* with Israel, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus.

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph 3:6, 10-11).

**D. Our privilege**

And you I have the enormous privilege of being part of the New Covenant and belonging to God's church. Oh I hope that I will have the opportunity to do series on Romans and Ephesians and Hebrews here at WRBC. As the hymn writer says:

Glorious things of thee are spoken  
Zion, city of our God.  
He whose word cannot be broken  
fixed thee for his own abode  
On the Rock of Ages founded  
What can shake thy sure repose  
With salvation's walls surrounded  
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

**E. God's Mega-Plan is centred in his Mega-Person.**

He has always had this one plan. Yes, it was revealed at a particular point in history, but everyone who was ever saved and everyone who ever will be saved is saved on the basis of Jesus.

You and I are afforded the opportunity of knowing him and following him. God allowed the heinous act of the murder of his Son to bring salvation. The mega-plan came together in Jesus.

Listen to Paul:

Where are the wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength  
(1 Cor. 1: 20-25).

**Conclusion**

The murder of the landowner's son was monstrous. Moreover, it pales into insignificance when compared with the crime of crucifying God's Son. But the ultimate crime was part of God's mega-plan. Indeed, it was right at the center of God's plan. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). How marvelous that man's ultimate crime should lie right at the center of God's mega-plan! And how wonderful that God's grace should be extended to the perpetrators! (Acts 3:17-18) We are no better than they were and the same grace is extended to us. I need to ask you whether you have availed yourself of his grace. There is no more important matter; there is no other way; and there is no more gracious offer.