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chapter one

THE PURPOSE OF THE BIBLE

- ❖ *What does it mean to say that the Bible is primarily a book of salvation?*
 - ❖ *In what ways do we see Jesus Christ in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament?*
 - ❖ *How does Scripture draw from us a response of faith?*
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The choice of a book to read and the way in which we read it are determined largely by the author's purpose in writing it. Is it a textbook of science or history intended to inform, or a novel meant purely to entertain? Is it a piece of serious prose or poetry in which the writer reflects on life and stimulates the reader to think about it too? Does it speak in any meaningful way to the contemporary world? Or is it perhaps a controversial work in which he deliberately sets out to argue his point of view? Moreover, is the author qualified to write on the subject? Questions like these are often in our minds when we ask, "Is it worth reading?"

Most books supply the prospective reader with the information he wants about who wrote them and why. Either the author tells us candidly in a preface about himself and his object in writing, or the publisher does so in the "blurb" on the dustcover. Most readers spend time examining these before committing themselves to buy, borrow or read the book.

It is a great pity that readers of the Bible do not always ask the same questions. Many appear to pick it up and begin their reading at random. Some start at Genesis and get stuck in Leviticus. Others may doggedly persevere from a sense of duty, even setting (and achieving) a target of reading the whole Bible through section by section in five years, but without deriving much benefit from their

study because they lack understanding of the book's overall purpose. Or indeed many give up Bible reading altogether, or never start it, because they cannot see how the tale of a faraway people in a faraway age could have any relevance for them today.

In any case, how can the Bible, which in fact is not a book but a library of sixty-six books, possibly be said to have a "purpose"? Was it not compiled by different authors at different times with different objectives? Yes and no. There is indeed a wide variety of human author and theme. Yet behind these, Christians believe, there lies a single divine Author with a single unifying theme.

The Bible itself declares what this theme is. It is stated several times in several places, but perhaps nowhere more succinctly than by the apostle Paul to Timothy:

From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:15–17)

Here the apostle brings together both the origin and the object of Scripture, where it comes from and what it is intended for. Its origin: "God-breathed." Its object: "useful" for human beings. Indeed, it is useful for us only *because* it is God-breathed—inspired by God. The subject of biblical inspiration I must leave to a later chapter; in this chapter I want to investigate the nature of the Bible's usefulness. For this I will take up three words which Paul used—"salvation," "Christ" and "faith."

A Book of Salvation

Perhaps no biblical word has suffered more from misuse and misunderstanding than the word "salvation." Some of us Christians are to blame for the caricature of it which we have presented to the world. As a result, the word "salvation" has become for many a source of embarrassment, even an object of ridicule. We need to rescue it from the narrow concept to which we have often debased it. For "salvation" is a big and noble word, as I shall soon elaborate.

Salvation is freedom. Yes, and renewal too; ultimately the renewal of the whole cosmos.

Now the supreme purpose of the Bible, Paul writes to Timothy, is to instruct its readers "for salvation." This immediately indicates that Scripture has a practical purpose, and that this purpose is moral rather than intellectual. Or rather its intellectual instruction (its "wisdom," as the Greek word implies) is given with a view to the moral experience called "salvation."

In order to grasp more firmly this positive purpose of Scripture, it may be helpful to contrast it with some purposes it does not have.

First, the purpose of the Bible is not scientific. This is not to say that the teaching of Scripture and of science are in conflict with one another for, when we keep each to its proper sphere and discern what each is affirming, they are not. Indeed, if the God of truth is the author of both, they could not be. Nor is it to say that the two spheres never overlap and that nothing in the Bible has any scientific relevance, for the Bible does contain statements of fact which can be (and in many cases have been) scientifically verified. For example, a number of historical facts are recorded, such as that Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon besieged, took and virtually destroyed Jerusalem, and that Jesus of Nazareth was born when Augustus was Emperor of Rome. What I am asserting rather is that, though the Bible may contain some science, the *purpose* of the Bible is not scientific.

Science (or at least natural science) is a body of knowledge painstakingly acquired by observation, experiment and induction. The purpose of God through Scripture, however, has been to disclose truths which could not be discovered by this method (called by scientists the "empirical" method), but would have remained unknown and undiscovered if he had not revealed them. For instance, science may be able to tell us something about man's physical origins (even this is an open question); only the Bible reveals man's nature, both his unique nobility as a creature made in the Creator's image and his degradation as a self-centered sinner in revolt against his Creator.

Next, the purpose of the Bible is not literary. Some years ago a book was published entitled *The Bible Designed to Be Read as*

Literature. It was beautifully produced. The traditional verse-arrangement was abandoned. And the layout indicated plainly what was poetry and what was prose. All this was helpful. Further, no one can deny, whatever his beliefs or disbeliefs, that the Bible does contain noble literature. It deals with the great themes of human life and destiny, and handles them with simplicity, insight and imagination. So fine was its original translation in some countries, such as England and Germany, that the Bible has become part of the nation's literary heritage. Nevertheless, God did not design the Bible as great literature. It contains some glaring stylistic weaknesses. The New Testament was largely written in *koiné* Greek, the everyday language of market and office, and much of it lacks literary polish, even grammatical accuracy. The purpose of the Bible is to be found in its message, not in its style.

Thirdly, the purpose of the Bible is not philosophical. Of course Scripture contains profound wisdom, in fact the wisdom of God. But some of the great themes with which philosophers have always wrestled are not given a thorough treatment in Scripture. Take the great problems of suffering and evil. As phenomena of human experience they figure prominently throughout the Bible. On almost every page men and women sin, and men and women suffer. And some light is thrown—supremely by the cross—on both problems. But no ultimate explanation of either is offered, nor are the ways of God justified in relation to them, in terms acceptable to human philosophy. Even in the Book of Job, which concentrates on the problem of suffering, Job in the end humbles himself before God without understanding God's providence. I think the reason is simply that the Bible is more a practical than a theoretical book. It is more concerned to tell us how to bear suffering and overcome evil than it is to philosophize about their origin and purpose.

So the Bible is primarily a book neither of science, nor of literature, nor of philosophy, but of salvation.

In saying this we must give the word "salvation" its broadest possible meaning. Salvation is far more than merely the forgiveness of sins. It includes the whole sweep of God's purpose to redeem and restore humankind, and indeed all creation. What we claim for the Bible is that it unfolds God's total plan.

It begins with the creation, so that we may know the divine likeness in which we were made, the obligations which we have repudiated and the heights from which we have fallen. We can understand neither what we are in sin nor what we may be by grace until we know what we once were by creation.

The Bible goes on to tell us how sin entered into the world, and death as a result of sin. It emphasizes the gravity of sin as a revolt against the authority of God our Creator and Lord, and the justice of his judgment upon it. There are many salutary warnings in Scripture about the perils of disobedience.

But the main thrust of the biblical message, as will be elaborated in chapter 5, is that God loves the very rebels who deserve nothing at his hand but judgment. Before time began, Scripture says, his plan of salvation took shape. It originated in his grace, his free and unmerited mercy. He made with Abraham a covenant of grace, promising through his posterity to bless all the families of the earth. The rest of the Old Testament is devoted to an account of his gracious dealings with Abraham's posterity, the people of Israel. In spite of their obstinate rejection of his word, as it came to them through law and prophets, he never cast them off. *They* broke the covenant, not he.

The historical coming of Jesus Christ was in fulfillment of his covenant:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come and has redeemed his people.
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.
(Luke 1:68–75)

It is important to observe that the promised “salvation” from “our enemies” is understood in terms of “holiness and righteousness” and—later in the same passage—of “the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God.”

So the New Testament concentrates on the outworking of this salvation, on the way of “forgiveness” and of “holiness” through Jesus Christ’s death, resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. The apostles emphasize that forgiveness is possible only through the sin-bearing death of Christ, and a new birth leading to a new life only through the Spirit of Christ. Then the Epistles are full of practical ethical instruction. As the New English Bible translates 2 Timothy 3:16, Scripture is profitable not only “for teaching the truth and refuting error” but “for reformation of manners and discipline in right living.” It also portrays Christ’s church as the society of the saved, who are called to a life of sacrificial service and witness in the world.

Finally, the New Testament authors insist that although God’s people have already in one sense been saved, in another their salvation lies still in the future. We are given the promise that one day our bodies will be redeemed. “In this hope we were saved” (Rom. 8:24). And in this final redemption the whole creation will somehow be involved. If we are to be clothed with new bodies, there is also going to be a new heaven and a new earth pervaded by righteousness alone. Then and only then, with no sin either in our nature or in our society, will God’s salvation be complete. The glorious liberty of God’s children will be the freedom to serve. God will be everything to everybody (Rom. 8:21; 1 Cor. 15:28).

Such is the comprehensive salvation set forth in Scripture. Conceived in a past eternity, achieved at a point in time and historically worked out in human experience, it will reach its consummation in the eternity of the future. The Bible is unique in its claim to instruct us for “such a great salvation” (Heb. 2:3).

Christ in the Law

The salvation for which the Bible instructs us is available “through faith in Christ Jesus.” Therefore, since Scripture concerns salvation and salvation is through Christ, Scripture is full of Christ.

Jesus himself thus understood the nature and function of the Bible. “The Scriptures,” he said, “testify about me” (John 5:39). Again, walking with two disciples after the Resurrection, from Jerusalem to Emmaus, he rebuked them for their folly and unbelief due to their ignorance of Scripture. Luke who tells the story adds:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:27)

A little while later the risen Lord said to a wider group of his followers:

This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. (Luke 24:44)

Christ’s assertion was, then, not only that the Scriptures bore witness to him in a general way, but that in each of the three divisions of the Old Testament Scripture—the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms (or “Writings”)—there were things concerning him, and that all these things must be fulfilled.

The fundamental relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament, according to Christ, is that between promise and fulfillment. The very first word Jesus uttered in his public ministry (in the Greek text of the Gospel of Mark) indicates this. It was the word “fulfilled”:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel. (Mark 1:15 RSV)

Jesus Christ was deeply convinced that the long centuries of expectation were over, and that he himself had ushered in the days of fulfillment. So he could say to his apostles:

Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matt. 13:16–17)