

What's Important to God

There's more in Scripture than the words of the text. For example, as we've noted in previous lessons, theology is embedded in the narratives of the Bible, which makes reading Scripture both challenging and rewarding. Even the order or organization of the material that the author places before us can be important theologically. After all, the ultimate Author of Scripture is the One who created not only language, but order and beauty, so we should look for significance between the lines of the text as well as in an overview of the text. Let's consider here two examples of how seeing the author's arrangement should be read canonically and theologically: The story of David and Paul's Letter to the Romans.

I The author of Chronicles organized his material theologically, as I shall try to demonstrate. The narrative of the events of David's reign is told from 1 Chronicles Chapter 10 (the death of Saul and transition to David) and goes to Chapter 22. And it begins with David conquering Jerusalem (Chapter 11). The end of the story of David deals with his preparations for building the Temple at Jerusalem. And at the center of the story of David is bringing the ark back to Jerusalem (Chapter 15). What does this arrangement tell us? What's important to David, indeed, what's important to God, is . . . Jerusalem! Why? Because that city is where God had chosen to reside with His elect people, the Israelites. And David's obsession was having God present in the midst of his people. The theology of this is profound.

At Creation, God and His human creatures were to dwell together. God resided atop the Mount of Eden, and the humans were in the garden surrounding the mount. It was God's intent to have His human image-bearers blessed by His presence with them. And they would fellowship together when God would descend the mountain. Ever since Adam and his wife were thrown out of the Garden, however, God has been on mission to renew the sin-ruptured fellowship.

David was a man after God's heart. Thus the desire of David is the desire of God, viz., to renew that intimate fellowship. The ark represents the presence of God, and Jerusalem the place of God's abode. The choice of that city is not only for God to be with David, his capital city, but to be at the center of that Land with all His beloved people. More to the point, Israel happens to be the very center of the land mass of planet earth, so God dwelling there signifies his intent to have fellowship not only with His people but with all the humans He created. Jerusalem is also the place where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord (Genesis 22). This location is central on Earth to indicate that the knowledge of God was to be taken in all directions to all the Gentile peoples so that they too might be in relationship with the living Creator God.

Dear reader, if you haven't read 1 Chronicles 21:14-28 lately, I implore you to go there now and read it! It's too thrilling for words. David encountered an angel of the Lord at a particular site at Jerusalem, probably the very site of the binding of Isaac. David purchased that site, **"built an altar to the Lord there and sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. He called on the Lord and the Lord answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering"** (v.26). That site was where the Temple that Solomon, David's son, built was located.

But David had another burning desire, to see God ruling over a theocratic kingdom. David understood from prior Scripture that there needs to be a mediator between God and His people. Moses was one such person and he, David, was another. But there needed yet to come one who would be greater, an anointed King, to establish an ideal rule under the headship of God. Jerusalem would be the city from which that rule would extend. David's psalms anticipate both of these visions, God dwelling in fellowship with His beloved people, and a future ideal Messianic ruler.

Except for a few bright spots, the Monarchy in Israel failed. But the promise remained. In time, Jesus came, the ultimate and greater son of David, the promised Messiah, who was prophetically called Immanuel, "God with us." He came to Jerusalem to fulfill both of God's and David's visions. He was God incarnate come to dwell with His beloved people. He fulfilled God's missional intent of making it possible for a sinful humanity to be in loving fellowship with the living Creator God. He also was that promised theocratic Ruler. His rejection by the Jewish people means only that the kingdom has been postponed. It will come; it *must* come. It was promised by a holy God who cannot lie. David's obsession was God's obsession. May it be ours as well.

There's something else. It's between the lines of Scripture, especially here in the David narratives. God is *a se*. Why would He, an infinite Being, condescend to enter into a relationship with creatures made from physical matter? Especially, why fellowship with *rebellious* human creatures? Answer: Love! Love in Scripture isn't a Hollywood emotion. Love is something unique in God's character that is transcendent; it is selflessly, sacrificially giving to others, seeking the good, the blessing of the object of that love. As for the rebellion, God has dealt with that and will deal with it even more fully in the future. God's love, as demonstrated by all He's done and will do for us, is the greatest and most supreme reality in existence. The

fellowship we're invited into should radically transform our lives. It also should be how we relate to others, *viz.*, with the same kind of selfless, sacrificial love that seeks the good and the blessing of others.

II Paul's Letter to the Romans is tightly organized, and in that organization there's a deep theological lesson. This letter is not just a treatise on salvation, as most commentators allege. It's an "occasional" letter, that is, it was written to deal with a situation that arose at Rome that required Paul's apostolic input. Emperor Claudius threw the Jews out of Rome in 49 AD, and that necessarily included the Jewish believers in Rome. When they were allowed to return, they found their church filled with Gentile believers. And there was conflict. This Letter is how Paul dealt with that situation. With supernatural insight, Paul understood that the real problem was not Jewish/Gentile differences, but being in submission to God's great redemptive plan for all humanity. His explanation required discourse on the nature and purpose of the Gospel, to be sure, but its goal was for unity of the Church. And that would only come about by each believer being obedient to God.

Notice that Paul uses "obedience" or "obey" at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the Letter. Thus, ". . . **to call people from among the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith**" (1:5b); see also 6:15-18, and 16:26b. This "beginning/middle/end" pattern indicates the theme of this Scripture is, the goal or purpose of salvation is to obey God. Exercising faith is not an act of obedience. (If it were, that would be works salvation, and besides the point of Chapter 7 is, we are not able to obey a command from God, not even to trust Christ.) Rather, what 1:5b means is, the purpose of faith is obedience. We trust Christ, *then* we obey Him. It's the Holy Spirit in us who makes obedience possible.

Yes, justification by faith is in this Letter. But that's not its theme. The theme or central lesson is obedience. We're justified so *that* we can go on to a life of obedience. Justification is the starting point. Our lives are to demonstrate God's righteousness and our necessary sanctification. The Gospel Paul proclaims transforms us into the image of the Son. Why? Because it puts God's righteous character on display. Obedience glorifies God.

Chapter 1 has Paul's litany of vices that characterize a humanity disobedient to God. And Chapter 13 brings Paul's argument in this Letter to a sharp focus. Paul surely is directly referring to the Emperor's edict. We're to submit to what God has ordered. And submission is obedience. The primary role of government, after all, is to maintain social order. We must have order, even if it inconveniences or causes us pain, because without order there's only chaos, which is far worse. Paul's arrangement of material reveals his insight as to what's really important to God.

What is it about obedience that's so important? It's not difficult to answer that. Obedience is what naturally should occur to acknowledge who God is. We are finite, fallible, mortal creatures, and He is the infinite, transcendent Maker of the heavens and earth and all life. He is good, wise, and perfect in His Person and all His works. Obedience to His words, to His instructions and commands, therefore honors Him for who He is – God! We owe it to God because of the nature of reality. We can also say that obedience is a necessary way of expressing love. If we know who God is, we should love Him. And loving Him, we trust Him and obey Him. The unbeliever, enslaved to sin, is unwilling to obey God, and can't do it even if he were so inclined. Believers, however, having been gifted with the Holy Spirit, are able to obey God. Paul's argument is not merely that we should want to do that, but that we do it. Furthermore, God seems to have other purposes for His creation besides redemption. The defeat of all evil is one of those cosmic purposes. And obedience to God demonstrates that we're on the side of good, as opposed to being on the side of evil by being disobedient.

I need to present this truth as starkly as it really is, as it's of primary importance to God. Disobedience is not innocuous, as if it were "So what, so I didn't do my homework!" Refusal to obey God's revealed will is to exalt oneself at God's expense. It's the sin of Satan, pride. It's in the same category as hatred of God, of idolatry, of worldliness, of Pharisaic self-righteousness, of sexual sins and other gross immorality. No one may be indifferent to God, ignore Him, or rebel against Him by disobedience without suffering consequences. Because of refusal to obey God's word in the Garden, sin and death and a horrible curse on all creation were introduced. Church attendance doesn't substitute for obedience, nor can the supposition that forgiveness of sins relieve us of our inherent obligation to obey God. This is not "works" salvation, nor is it "legalism," nor does it impugn the Gospel. There is no excuse for failing to obey the will of God plainly revealed to us.

* * *

I must conclude. God's Word is profound. Yet we can know from it what's important to God so that we can order our thinking, indeed our very lives, on it. And if we love God, we'll do it. Jesus reveals God so exactly that loving Him is loving God. And Jesus is totally lovely. So let's commit our lives to Him and receive His resurrected life, and serve Him obediently as He has willed. We'll then discover and, in love, make all that's important to God our own priorities as well. That will exalt God. That's why we're here.