

Programs in Tension: How to Read the New Testament

Introduction: The Problem

Many contradictions *seem* to exist in the New Testament and have led to confusion and controversies over how a person is saved, whether salvation can be lost, the nature of the kingdom of God, if believers are subject to the Mosaic Law, etc. To deconflict apparent contradictions, two rubrics will be used: the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God.

Most problems result from theologians confusing God's strategic plan with His tactical plans and muddling His tactical plans. God's strategic plan is to solve the problem of evil, resolve the angelic conflict, and redeem mankind from sin and death. God stated his strategic plan in Genesis 3.15, the seed of the woman would defeat Satan's seed. He introduced His main tactical plan when He called Abraham and established the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12.1-3). Through this covenant, Israel came into existence as God's channel to bless the nations. When Israel faltered, by rejecting her Messiah, God, in grace, initiated His supporting effort: the Church, the body of Christ. The New Testament contains both tactical plans, God's main effort, Israel, and His supporting effort, the Church. These plans do not conflict but were in tension during the lives of the apostles, for it was unclear whether Israel would accept Jesus as their Messiah. Mixing these plans has caused Christendom's confusion and disunity. At present, God's supporting plan, the Church is operating. Once completed, God will resume His main effort, Israel. Understanding these plans removes apparent contradictions.

The Beginning

The Gospels continue the Old Testament where Malachi ends,

with John the Baptist as potential Elijah, and Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God:

¹ Now in those days, John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ² and saying, Repent! For the kingdom of the heavens has come near (Matthew 3.1-2).

And He kept going throughout all Galilee teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease, and every sickness among the people (Matthew 4.23).

The gospel of the kingdom, in which the Messiah will reign on earth, summarizes Jewish theology: God's covenant promises to Israel that began with the Abrahamic Covenant that will be fulfilled in Christ's earthy kingdom (Zechariah 14.9) and how Gentiles will be blessed through Israel.

Paul brings something entirely different. He proclaimed the "gospel of the grace of God," not the "gospel of the kingdom." His writings declare revelations and secrets (1 Corinthians 4.1) he received from the ascended Lord, things not taught by the prophets, Jesus in His earthly ministry, or by the Twelve. These revelations are outside of God's covenant promises—they were *new* revelations of a new program, the Church.

Therefore, "the gospel of the kingdom" concerns God's covenant program and "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24; Ephesians 3.7-8) concerns the Church. They are rubrics for two distinct divine programs. One must keep these programs separate to avoid apparent contradictions. Thus:

1. John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Twelve proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 3.1-2, 4.17) and Paul proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20.24). Tension between these two gospel programs led to the controversy recorded in Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council.

2. The gospel of the kingdom focused on Christ's *identity*, who Jesus was, the Messiah (Matthew 16.16-17; John 1.49-51, 6.69, 11.23-27). The gospel of the grace of God focuses on Christ's *work*: His death, burial, and resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4; 1 Thessalonians 4.14).
3. Salvation under the gospel of the kingdom required faith *and* works: one had to believe Jesus was the Messiah (Matthew 16.15-17; John 1.48-51, 11.25-27), keep the Mosaic Law (Matthew 19.16-22), forgive others (Matthew 6.12, 14-15), and be baptized in water (Mark 1.4, 16.15-16; Luke 3.3; John 3.4-5; Acts 2.38, 22.16). Salvation under Paul's gospel of grace requires faith *alone* (Romans 1.16-17, 3.22, 25, 28; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4; Ephesians 2.8-9).
4. Under the gospel of the kingdom, God's forgiveness required forgiving others (Matthew 6.12, 14-15). Under the gospel of grace, one forgives because one has God's forgiveness (Ephesians 4.32; Colossians 3.12-13).
5. The gospel of the kingdom operated under the administration of the Mosaic Law (Matthew 8.3-4, 19.16-22; Acts 3.1, 21.20-21). Under the gospel of the grace of God, believers are *not* under the law but under grace, governed by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5.18; Romans 6.14).
6. Under the gospel of the kingdom, Jesus taught that one who asked God, believing, he would receive (Matthew 21.22; John 14.13; 1 John 3.22, 5.15). Under the gospel of grace, believers are to pray without ceasing and petition God (1 Thessalonians 5.17; Philippians 4.6) but no promise is given one will receive what one has asked (2 Corinthians 12.7-9).
7. The kingdom under the gospel of the kingdom was the earthly kingdom described by the prophets (Isaiah 2.2-4,

11.1-16; Zechariah 14.9; Matthew 6.10). Under the gospel of grace, heaven is the destiny of the Church, God's new creation (Ephesians 1.3, 2.6; Philippians 3.20; Colossians 1.5).

8. Under the gospel of the kingdom, Jesus is King (Matthew 2.2, 27.11, 29, 37). Under the gospel grace, Jesus is the Head of the Body, the Church (Ephesians 1.22-23, 4.15, 5.23; Colossians 1.19).

Theologians recognize these differences exist but have attempted to merge them rather than keep them separate. Homogeneity can only occur by twisting passages out of context and interpreting them to mean something other than their plain sense. A better understanding is required.

Setting the Stage

For 2,000 years, God dealt directly with all mankind. God's call of Abraham and establishing the Abrahamic Covenant changed everything. God created a new program. No longer would He deal directly with the entire human race. Instead, He created a new people, a covenant people, the Jews, through whom He would reveal Himself. They would be His agents to bless mankind. This change divided the human race into Jew and Gentile. The Abrahamic Covenant reads:

¹ Now the LORD had said to Abram, Leave your country and your relatives, and your father's house, for the land I will show you. ² And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

³ And I will bless them that bless you, and curse him that curses you. And in you will all families of the earth be blessed (Genesis 12.1-3).

The Abrahamic Covenant, with Israel as its centerpiece, became the foundation of God's covenant and prophetic program. God would bless Israel, and Israel would bless the nations, the

Gentiles. Thus, we read:

⁶ I the Lord have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles, ⁷ to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house (Isaiah 42.6-7).

And He said, It is a light thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give you for a light to the Gentiles, that you may be My salvation to the end of the earth (Isaiah 49.6).

God was Israel's light and Israel was to be God's light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42.6, 49.6) as a nation of priests (Exodus 19.6; Isaiah 61.6; 1 Peter 2.9). They would bring Gentiles to God (Micah 4.2; Zechariah 8.20-23) and be ministers of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31.31; Matthew 26.28). This required Israel to accept the Messiah. That was the rub.

The Lord gave the Twelve the "great commission" (Matthew 28.18-20) to fulfill this prophetic program. They were to begin at Jerusalem, then go to Judea, then Samaria, and last, to the rest of the world (Acts 1.8). Peter obeyed and went to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. He told the Jews that every one of them must repent and believe Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah (Acts 2.36-38, 3.11-26). Many Jews did believe. But the nation as a whole continued to reject Christ. Stephen, at his trial, condemned the nation's leaders, the Sanhedrin, for their unbelief. They responded by stoning him (Acts 7). This showed they would not accept Jesus as their Messiah. In response, in grace, God did the unexpected, even as He had done 2,000 years earlier with Abraham: He began a new program. He chose Paul, in light of Israel's continued rejection, as "apostle of Gentiles" (Acts 9.15; Romans 11.13). God gave him the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20.24). Paul wrote this

program was a secret (Ephesian 3.1-13). God had not revealed it through the prophets, in Jesus' earthly ministry, or through the teaching of the Twelve. It was new. Now, instead of two divisions, Jew and Gentile, God created a third: the Church, the body of Christ. Paul wrote:

Do not offend Jews, or Greeks, or the Church of the God (1 Corinthians 10.32).

The Church is God's new organism in which Jew and Gentile lose their identity as Jew and Gentile and become "Church," equal in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. A Jew or a Gentile who believes Paul's gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4), becomes "Church," (2 Corinthians 5.16-17; Galatians 3.28; Colossians 3.10-11), no longer Jew or Gentile.

Thus, God's saving and commissioning Paul (Acts 9, 22, 26) created a new program, a supporting effort in His salvific plan based in grace. God's program to Israel (the gospel of the kingdom) and God's new program of the Church (the gospel of the grace of God) operated in parallel during the lives of the apostles. Separate and distinct, they did not contradict or conflict with each other. But during the lives of the apostles, they remained in tension to give national Israel opportunity to repent. That prospect ceased in A.D. 70 when Titus' legions destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem.

What God Revealed

God has revealed the who, what, where, and how of His prophetic plan. He has kept hidden "when." "When" is shrouded in secrecy. The prophets revealed two great events: 1) God's wrath on earth and 2) God's kingdom on earth. David summarized God's prophetic program in Psalm 2. All that is described in the Psalm seems to occur in close proximity with no gaps:

¹ Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? ² The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers

counsel together against the Lord and against His anointed, saying, ³ Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. ⁴ He who sits in the heavens will laugh: the Lord will have them in derision. ⁵ Then will he speak to them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure. ⁶ Yet have I set My King on My holy hill of Zion. ⁷ I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to me, You are my Son; this day I have begotten you. ⁸ Ask of Me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession. ⁹ You will break them with a rod of iron You will dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. ¹⁰ Be wise now therefore, O you kings. Be instructed, you judges of the earth. ¹¹ Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. ¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you perish from the way when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

The psalm showed the following: humanity's rejection of Christ (verses 1-3) and God's response of wrath (verses 4-5). Verse 6 revealed the Messiah's rule, His inheritance of the Gentiles (verse 8), and the nature of His rule (verse 9). The centerpiece (appropriately in the middle of the psalm) was Christ's resurrection (verse 7, cf. Acts 13.33). Lastly, was God's warning to be wise: trust the Son (verses 10-12).

God judged Jesus' generation of Jews for rejecting Him with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70. Like the generation of Jews that came out of Egypt with Moses, wandered in the desert forty years, and failed to enter the promised land, God tested Jesus' generation forty years with an opportunity to accept their King. They too failed.

A future, worldwide judgment remains. The prophets described it as the Day of the Lord and Jesus called the Tribulation. He

declared it would be so terrible that left uncurtailed, no human life would survive (Matthew 24.22; Mark 13.20). No apparent break or gap was indicated in Psalm 2 between Christ's rejection, God's wrath, and the setting up of the kingdom. Why? The prophecy accommodated human will. Had the Jews accepted Jesus as their Messiah, the prophetic plan would have been completed. John the Baptist and the Twelve assumed this would happen and Gentiles, according to prophecy, would be blessed as a result of Israel's obedience. No prophecy existed about God's blessing Gentiles apart from Israel's obedience. This can be seen, even years after Pentecost, by Peter's reaction to the Lord's telling him to go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. While the Lord had told the Twelve to go to Gentiles (Matthew 28.19), He specified an order for this ministry (Acts 1.8). Peter balked because Israel had not yet accepted the Messiah. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem held the same theological view as seen from their reaction to Peter's visit (Acts 10.9-11.18).

John the Baptist and Jesus declared the kingdom of God was "near" (Matthew 3.2, 4.17, 10.7). It appeared God's prophetic plan was about to be fulfilled. The Twelve, and later, Paul, thought the Lord would return soon. How should we view "nearness?"

"Nearness" in the Old Testament

Centuries before John the Baptist or Jesus spoke, Israel's prophets wrote the Day of the Lord was "near." The "Day of the Lord" encompasses God's wrath and His kingdom, but most references refer to His judgment. Joel, who prophesied in the 9th century B.C., declared it was "near."

Alas for the day! For the day of the LORD is near, and it will come as destruction from the Almighty (Joel 1.15).

Blow the trumpet in Zion and sound an alarm in My holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for

the day of the LORD comes, for it is near (Joel 2.1).

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision (Joel 3.14).

Isaiah, who wrote in the 8th century, echoed Joel:

Wail, for the day of the LORD is near! It will come as destruction from the Almighty (Isaiah 13.6).

Zephaniah, writing in the 7th century declared:

Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is near, for the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, He has consecrated His guests (Zephaniah 1.7).

The great day of the LORD is near, near and coming quickly, even the voice of the day of the LORD! The warrior cries out bitterly (Zephaniah 1.14).

Ezekiel and Obadiah wrote in the 6th century:

For the day is near, even the day of the LORD is near. It will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations (Ezekiel 30.3).

For the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head (Obadiah 1.15).

By the time John the Baptist began his ministry, over 800 years had passed since these prophecies began. What did “near” mean?

“Nearness” in the New Testament

John the Baptist announced the kingdom of God was near. The

verb “near,” ἐγγίζω and the adverb ἐγγύς mean near in time or place. The straightforward sense was that the long-anticipated kingdom of God was about to be realized. The King was present in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was ready to establish His kingdom on earth. Matthew wrote:

⁵ Jesus sent out these Twelve after He commanded them, saying, Do not go into the way of the Gentiles and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. ⁶ Rather, go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷ Now, as you travel, proclaim saying, The kingdom of the heavens has come near (Matthew 10.5-7; cf. 3.1-2, 4.17).

On the day of Pentecost, after Jesus had been crucified and had risen from the dead, Luke recorded Peter’s declaration to the Jews:

¹⁴ But Peter, after he stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and spoke to them, Men of Judea, and all those residing in Jerusalem, understand this and pay attention to my words!

¹⁵ For these are not drunk, as you suppose. For it is the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what has been spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ And it will be in the last days, says the God, I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh. And your sons and your daughters will prophesy. And your young men will see visions. And your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ And on My men servants and my women servants in those days, I will pour out of My Spirit, and they will prophesy. ¹⁹ And I will give wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below—blood and fire and billows of smoke. ²⁰ The sun will be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes. ²¹ And it will be, everyone who should call on the name of the Lord will be

saved (Acts 2.14-21).

The kingdom was near. But realization was *conditional*.

The World of “Maybe”

The apostles thought the Lord would return in their lifetime. The prophecies seemed to indicate once the Messiah came, all would be fulfilled in a short timeframe. Jesus made several statements which seemed to confirm this:

Truly I tell you, Some of the ones who stand here will never taste death until they should see the Son of the Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16.28 cf. Mark 9.1; Luke 9.27).

Jesus seemed to say these things *would* happen in their lifetime. Consider His words to the high priest:

⁶² *Now when the high priest stood up, he said to Him, You say nothing? What about these who testify against you? ⁶³ But Jesus remained silent. Then the high priest said to Him, I demand by the living God, that you should tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of the God! ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, Yes. However, I tell you, from now on, you will see the Son of the Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of the heaven (Matthew 26.62-64).*

Jesus told the high priest he would witness His return. What did He mean? Did the high priest witness Jesus' return? John wrote:

Behold, He comes with the clouds. And every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him. And all the peoples of the earth will wail because of Him. Yes! Amen (Revelation 1.7)!

“Every eye” means every eye of every created being. All will

see Him—those alive and those who have died. This includes those who crucified Him—the high priest. All witness Christ's return. The Lord did not tell the high priest he would see Him *before* he died, only that when he next saw Him, he would see Him in His glory.

What are we to make of the following statement by Jesus?

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things should happen (Matthew 24.34).

The verb “pass,” παρέλθῃ, in the clause οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἡ γενεὰ αὕτη, is in the subjunctive mood, the mood of contingency, and is coupled with the double negative, the strongest negation. Jesus meant that the generation of which He spoke, the generation that experiences the Tribulation, will not pass away before all the things He declared occurred.

Again, Jesus stated,

Now when they persecute you in this city, flee to another. For truly I tell you, you will not finish going through all the cities of Israel before the Son of the Man comes (Matthew 10.23).

The verb “finish,” τελέσητε, is another subjunctive with the double negative οὐ μὴ, the strongest negation.

How must we understand these passages? They seemed to indicate these things would occur in Jesus' generation. They did not. Was Jesus mistaken? It would seem so unless we note other statements He made. Jesus qualified these statements in His lament about Jerusalem. He declared:

³⁷ *Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones the ones who have been sent to her! How often I wished to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under*

her wings, and you would not! ³⁸ *Behold, your house is left to you desolate!* ³⁹ *For I tell you, you will not see Me from now until you should say, Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord (Matthew 23.37-39).*

Jesus told the Jews, "You will not see Me," οὐ μὴ με ἴδητε, until they said, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." The expression, "you will not see Me" is again, the double negative with the subjunctive, the strongest negation. The verb "say," εἶπητε, is in the subjunctive mood, the mood of potential, "you should say." Did the Jews utter these words after Jesus' crucifixion? No. Could He return? No. He declared they would not see Him until they said these words. Thus, everything of which Jesus spoke was qualified by and contingent on Israel's repentance and belief that He is the Messiah, the Son of God.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared this message of national repentance:

³⁶ *Assuredly, therefore, let all the house of Israel know: The God made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.* ³⁷ *Now when they heard, they were pierced to the heart. Then they said to Peter and the other apostles, What should we do, men, brethren?* ³⁸ *Then Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for forgiveness of the sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.36-38).*

Note that Peter stated the entire nation must repent. In the next chapter of Acts, Peter again declared the same thing for the Lord to return.

¹⁹ *Therefore, repent and return so your sins might be wiped out,* ²⁰ *so that the season of refreshment might come from the*

presence of the Lord and that He might send the One chosen for you, Christ Jesus,²¹ whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, of which the God spoke through the mouth of all His holy prophets, from long ago (Acts 3.19-21).

The Lord's return was "near" but required Jewish national repentance.

Anticipation of the Lord's Soon Return

Many passages show the apostles believed the Jewish nation would repent and God would complete His prophetic program in their lifetime. Consider the following:

⁷ Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer awaits the valuable fruit of the earth, being patient for it, until it should receive early and latter rains. ⁸ So you be patient. Fortify your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has come near (James 5.7-8).

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the One according to His great mercy caused us to be reborn to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance which has been reserved in the heavens for you, ⁵ who, by the power of God are guarded, through faith, for the salvation, ready to be revealed in the last time, ⁶ in which you rejoice, though now for a season must suffer by various trials (1 Peter 1.3-6).

Now the end of all things has drawn near. Therefore, be sound-minded and prudent for the sake of the prayers (1 Peter 4.7).

¹⁷ Now you, beloved, remember the words which have been

previously said by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ They kept telling you that in the last time there will be scoffers, who follow their own lusts (Jude 1.17-18).

Young people, it is the last hour and as you heard, Antichrist is coming. Even now, many antichrists have appeared so we know that it is the last hour (1 John 2.18).

¹ The revelation of Jesus Christ, that God gave to Him, to show to His servants what things must soon take place. And He signified it because He sent it through His angel to His servant, John, ² who testified the word of the God, even the testimony of Jesus Christ, as many things as he saw. ³ Blessed is the one who reads, and the ones who hear the words of the prophecy, and who keep the things which have been written in it. For the time is near (Revelation 1.1-3)!

⁶ Then he said to me, These words are faithful and true. And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show to His servants what things must happen soon. ⁷ Behold! I come soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book (Revelation 22.6-7).

¹⁰ Then he said to me, Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹ The one who is unrighteous, let him continue unrighteous. And the one who is filthy, let him remain filthy. And the one who is righteous, let him continue doing righteousness. And the one who is holy, let him remain holy. ¹² Behold, I come soon. And My reward is with Me, to give to each according to his work (Revelation 22.10-12).

The One who testifies these things says, Yes! I am coming soon! Amen (Revelation 22.20).

Paul also wrote the Jews (cf. 2 Peter 3.15) about the anticipated soon coming of the Day of the Lord and His return in Hebrews.

²⁴ *And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not forsaking the gathering of ourselves, as is the custom with some, but by encouraging, even so much more as you see the day drawing near (Hebrews 10.24-25).*

³⁶ *For you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of the God you might receive the promise. ³⁷ For yet in a very little, the One who comes will come and will not delay (Hebrews 10.36-37).*

All these passages concerned God's prophetic program with Israel and the nations under the gospel of the kingdom. The apostles thought the Tribulation was about to come and that those who had believed the gospel of the kingdom would undergo its terrors. It was all potential. The Lord warned that the one who endured this trial to the end would be saved (Matthew 10.22, 24.13; Mark 13.13). He warned the seven Jewish congregations in Asia Minor about "overcoming," to remain faithful to Him, not worship the Beast or take his mark (Revelation 2-3). The reward for "overcoming" was eternal life. This was what He meant when He stated whoever would save his life (by worshiping the Beast) would lose it, and one who lost his life for Him (not worshiping the Beast) would save it (Matthew 16.25; Mark 8.35; Luke 9.24, 17.33).

Paul also thought the Lord would return soon. But, unlike those who had believed the gospel of the kingdom, Paul taught all who believed his gospel would *not* undergo the Tribulation. He wrote:

Much more, therefore, since we were now declared righteous by His blood, we will be saved from the wrath through Him

(Romans 5.9).

⁹ *For they themselves report about us how you welcomed us and how you turned to the God from the idols to serve the living and true God ¹⁰ and to wait for His Son from the heavens, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, the One who will rescue us from the coming wrath (1 Thessalonians 1.9-10).*

⁹ *Because the God did not appoint us for wrath but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ the One who died for us, so that whether we should watch or should sleep we should live together with Him (1 Thessalonians 5.9-10).*

Paul taught that *before* the Beast could come, God must remove His Church:

¹ *Now we ask you, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and of our gathering to Him, ² that you might not be easily shaken in your mind or be troubled, by neither spirit, or by word, or by a letter as if through us, that the day of the Lord has arrived. ³ Do not let anyone deceive you in any way. For the departure must come first and then the man of the sin should be revealed, the son of the destruction, ⁴ the one who opposes and exalts himself above every named god or object of worship, so that he will sit in the Temple of the God and display himself: that he is God (2 Thessalonians 2.1-4).*

The “departure,” ἀποστασία, is the Rapture. The Jews of Jesus’ generation were spared the Tribulation but suffered the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Those who believe Paul’s gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4) cannot undergo the Tribulation for God promised He will rescue His Church from

it. Since the Tribulation did not occur in Jesus' generation for those who had believed the gospel of the kingdom, that gospel will return after God has completed His Church (Matthew 24.14). Those alive after the Rapture will undergo the Tribulation and God will finish His prophetic program.

Paul thought God would complete the Church in his lifetime. He expected to experience the Rapture and then God would complete His prophetic program. Thus, he wrote:

¹¹ So do this, since we know the time, that it is already the hour for you to wake from sleep. For our salvation is now nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is advanced, the day has come near. Therefore, let us put away the works of the darkness. Let us be arrayed with the weapons of the light (Romans 13.11-12).

Now the God of the peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen (Romans 16.20)!

⁴ I thank my God always about you for the grace of God that was given to you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were made rich in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, ⁶ as the testimony of the Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ so you do not lack in any gift, as you impatiently await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who also will establish you to the end: blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1.4-8).

⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a secret: we will not all sleep but we will all be changed— ⁵² in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound. Then the dead will be raised incorruptible. Then, we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15.51-52).

¹³ Now I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, about those who sleep, so that you may not grieve, as the rest, those who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so also, the God will bring those who fell asleep through Jesus with Him. ¹⁵ For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who remain alive until the Lord comes, should not precede those who fell asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself, with a commanding shout, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will descend from heaven. And the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ Then, we who remain alive, will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4.13-17).

Resolving “Nearness”

As noted above, the Old Testament prophets declared the Day of the Lord was “near.” How are we to understand this in light of the fact that by the time John began his ministry, the prophecy was hundreds of years old? The answer is determined by how “nearness” is measured. God is eternal Spirit, beyond physical limits. The Psalmist recorded a prayer of Moses:

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night (Psalm 90.4).

Echoing the Psalmist, Peter wrote,

But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day (2 Peter 3.8).

Joel first proclaimed the Day of the Lord 2,800 years ago. For God, who has a God watch, that is less than three days. That is near.

“What If ” and the Church

What if Israel had accepted Jesus as the Messiah? Would He have gone to the cross? Yes. It was foreordained (Genesis 3.15; Isaiah 52.13-15, 53.1-12; 1 Corinthians 15.1-4). He had to die for mankind's sins. He had to rise from the dead (Psalm 16.10). Psalm 2 had laid out God's prophetic plan.

Had the Jews repented after Jesus' resurrection, the Tribulation would have occurred. One of the Julio-Claudian Caesars would have been the Antichrist and the Lord would have returned and set up His kingdom. It could have happened. But God in His foreknowledge knew it would not. Nevertheless, the offer of the kingdom was genuine.

What of the Church, the body of Christ? The Church is never mentioned in the Old Testament or the Gospels since it is not part of God's prophetic program. It was a secret. Would the Church have come into being if Israel had repented? The answer depends on when Israel would have repented. If before God saved Paul as apostle of Gentiles, the answer is No. God's prophetic plan would have continued uninterrupted. The Twelve would have gone to the Gentile world, the Tribulation would have occurred, and Christ would have returned and set up His kingdom. If Israel had repented after Paul, the Church would have been a small group of believers (as Paul thought) and the Lord would have returned for it before the Tribulation. Christ would then return at His second advent and set up His kingdom. Because of Israel's potential repentance, God's prophetic program, the gospel of the kingdom, and His Church program, the gospel of the grace of God, remained in tension during the lifetime of the apostles. God's genius incorporates mankind's free will to ensure His plan will turn out as He intended.

Does this mean the Church was an “afterthought” of God? Plan B? Was God's call of Abraham an “afterthought?” Was God's giving the Law an “afterthought?” Such questions are foolish. God knows what He is doing. His plan will bring all glory to

Himself and to those who love Him.

Conclusion

The part of the New Testament that contains the gospel of the kingdom (Israel) and God's prophetic plan includes the Gospels, some of Acts, the writings of Peter, James, John, Jude, and Paul's letter to the Hebrews. The gospel of the grace of God (the Church), and all Church doctrine, is found in Paul's thirteen letters, Romans through Philemon. To understand the Scriptures, one must understand God's two tactical plans and how they fit His overall strategic plan. The tactical plans do not conflict, but during the lives of the apostles they remained in tension to accommodate mankind's free will, specifically, whether national Israel would repent. In each of God's programs, God has given every person the knowledge of His existence and the opportunity for salvation—to choose one of two destinies: to trust Him and obtain joy and glory in the kingdom of light or to reject Him and suffer everlasting shame and contempt in the realm of darkness. Each person makes this choice. Paul explained God's plan with the illustration of the olive tree in Romans 11. At the end he exclaimed:

³³ O the depth of riches, both of wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and incomprehensible His ways! ³⁴ For who knew the mind of the Lord? Or who became His adviser? ³⁵ Or who first gave to Him so he will be repaid? ³⁶ For from Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all the things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Romans 11.22-36).

Paul's gospel of grace is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are for anyone who will believe this gospel. Salvation is a gift, courtesy of the Lord Jesus Christ. One only need believe this good news. It is

faith plus nothing. This is “the gospel of the grace of God.”
This is grace!

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