



CFI Study Notes – Bukuru, Jos

Salvation in Paul

A look at Philippians, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians and Corinthians.

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INTRODUCTION

Soteriology means the study of salvation. It is a well known category in Christian education. It normally begins with the letters of Paul. In those letters, we say, Paul is tracing out the truths of our personal salvation by faith. We say that this issue is at the centre of Paul's teaching.

However, this is a wrong view of Paul, and of salvation in general. Salvation by faith was not the central issue of Paul. And when we see salvation as primarily about our personal, or individual salvation, we make errors in our view of the biblical revelation.

Paul's Theme – The Community

There are other theological categories or titles that better locate Paul's writings and intent. One is ecclesiology. This means the study of the church. Paul was primarily writing about the believing community, and how this community reflected the promises of God to build his kingdom in the world. This kingdom and community was at the very centre of Paul's thinking.

Paul's Theme – The New Beginning

Another category of theology is known as eschatology. This comes from the word eschaton, or end. It doesn't refer to the end of the world, but to a new beginning of the world, a new creation. The "end" means the goal. Paul was writing about the goal of God in renewing the entire world. Instead of writing about our personal, or individual salvation, as the main goal of the gospel, Paul was speaking about how the new community of God brings about God's goal in renewing our communities, nations and world.

Individualism

This is where we have gone wrong in our biblical studies. Traditionally, we have put soteriology first. And I mean soteriology in our more traditional view, a personal or individual view of salvation. Whether in our churches, or in our bible schools, we start with our own interests in the gospel as individuals. We learn about our sin, our faith, our sanctification, our healing and prosperity, and ultimately about our destiny in heaven. If we still have time after all this, we may have a little teaching on our community which we call the church. This is standard bible school curriculum.

The Kingdom of God

But Paul did it the opposite way around. He wrote first about the church community and about how this community was the fulfillment of God's kingdom promises, his eschaton, or end purposes in renewing our whole creation. Paul spoke of our personal salvation, only as the door into the family of God, into the wider, more important purposes and promises of God. Our personal salvation was just a part of the bigger picture Paul was speaking about.

Now, we are trying to study Paul's writing the right way around. We are still beginning with soteriology, but soteriology from Paul's view point. What did soteriology mean to Paul? What was Paul's doctrine of salvation? Our answer to this question will be very different to our traditional view. Paul's writings on salvation are very different to way we view salvation today.

REDUCTIONIST SALVATION

But before looking at Paul's wider view of salvation, we will look at the consequences of a truncated or reductionist view of salvation. Truncated and reductionist mean to reduce something down to be less than what it really is.

Because in our modern evangelical view of faith, we have opted for a very individualistic view of salvation, it has produced a lot of very negative consequences in our communities. These are many, and we will try to list just a few here.

Earthlessness is not our Destiny

First, it means that we believe heaven is our destiny. This produces a very negative view towards the earth, which we justify by misinterpretations from the scripture. We believe God has no purpose for this world and will destroy it. We believe the earth has no renewed eternal purpose.

One consequence of this is that we evangelicals can be among the most non-conservationist people on the planet. We don't have to talk about controversial matters, such as whether global-warming is a reality, or what may be its causes. Aside from that, there are key issues related to the conservation of our natural environment. It's not just about conserving our biosphere, but it involves other very important issues.

These include, how do we view the world? Is it there to be spent on our personal desires, to be consumed for our personal interests? Is it there for commercial empires to exploit, for the competing interest of our global corporations, economies and nations? These matters bring up questions that go to the very centre of what human life is all about.

Privatised World

That is, do we have a privatised view of the world in which we live? This goes back to how we interpret the message of God in scripture. For example, when we see in Genesis 1 that God made man in his image, how do we read this? Do we see that as referring to our self, or to mankind in general? Is it referring to the community of the human family?

We have built up a theology over the years that allows us to put aside the people in humanity that we regard as fallen, who are not part of our denomination, or for some other reason we don't agree with. Then we can go about our lives as individuals, using the creation from a mainly privatised viewpoint. When we speak of humanity as a wider community, we call that compromise, antichrist, or humanism.

But all this is to cover over a self-centred view of the world. We can go on exploiting the world, rather than seeing it as part of our community, something to be cared for by us, and something to be lived in on a shared basis, on the principles of a wider justice for all people. So, our convictions about our use of the earth in which we live don't really stem from godliness, but from a privatised self-centeredness. This was the state of the Pharisees, when Jesus approached them about their supposed private holiness.

Colluding with Injustice

We have invented an eschatology that isn't Pauline, to cover up our individualism and injustice in the world. Seeing end-times as a destruction of our enemies, as we "fly away" in a rapture to heaven,

covers up a selfish individualism that allows us to deny justice to a greater majority of people in the world.

This cancer in evangelical theology in recent years, has spread to far fields through our missions and books. It has produced a gospel of uncaring individualism. The majority of the world can go on suffering, as we call it the judgment of God, and as we replace the clear teachings of Jesus with a gospel of national preservation and self-interest. This has come to the fore in recent fascist style politics, that has been strongly supported by evangelicals, putting hope in military, rather than in helping the poor and refugee. Isaiah said the latter brings peace.

Our shrunken perspective has blinded us to our national politics and economics that has placed millions of lives in harm's way, and we have colluded with such injustice because it serves our own interest. Things like rampant corporate profits amongst the poorest people, illegal deposits from poorer nations held in European bank, crippling debt and interest payments by the poorest people in the world, buying up resources cheaply from poor nations, speculative investments raising prices, all go on year after year without us blinking. Rather, we profit from the loss of others. The Old Testament prophets would never have been quiet in such conditions.

Salvation - People of Justice

The early church did not see salvation this way. They saw themselves as one family, bringing justice to each other through mercy, across empire and national borders. They sat at one table, refusing to be divided by the world of their day. The early church was explicit, "Don't join this empire of exploitation of the poor, but come together in one baptism as one family, from all racial and economic backgrounds, and support each other, not counting what you have as your own." Living otherwise denies our baptism.

Ours is the same eschatology that Jesus corrected during his ministry. When the Jews looked for the destruction of Gog and Magog, the Samaritans, sinners, and Romans, to make Israel great again, Jesus instead called the Jews to serve those people. To Jesus, this was holiness, this was the way in which his kingdom comes to the world, even if we suffered in bringing it about. To Jesus, our suffering for the world is more important than our using the world for our desires. To Jesus, this is life. "Life does not consist in the abundance of the things we possess."

Throwaway Society

Our view of creation must change, from something to be used for our individual desires, and then cast aside. It must change from seeing the world as something to be exploited and consumed. We must move from a covetous view of creation, from a private consumerist model of life, to see the world we live in as a community. The biosphere is part of a community, to be cared for. And it is to be used responsibly to produce justice for all the world's people, and not competitively for those in control.

God is a renewing God. We live in a throwaway society. Relationships, people, enemies, foreigners, the poor, sick, sinners, members in bad standing, plastic, resources, are very easy for us to use and then throw away. We have become used to it. What we throw away pollutes the world, including throwing away bitter relationships. We believe one day we will throw away the earth itself. God renews our lives, even his enemies. He renews the creation. We need to embrace renewables, in resources and in relationships, in character with our Heavenly Father.

Idolatry Destroys Creation

Our view of salvation, in so far as it focuses on the individual, fails in the specific intention of the gospel. It fails to nip in the bud the whole problem with fallen creation, that is, our idolatry. In as much as self is still central, another god is central.

To bring God back into centrality, then it must be the God we see in Jesus Christ, in his selfless incarnation and cross. This is Paul's focus in Philippians 2. We are to have the mind of Christ, which he had towards this world and towards his enemy. He didn't put himself first, but instead he suffered to serve everybody else. This deals with our idolatry, healing our community and creation.

Self-Giving Faith

This is the reason our view of salvation is so unable to meet the challenges of our day. We are up against terrorists that have adopted a worldview that encompasses all parts of their life, that even means the laying down of their own lives. In our popular view of Christianity, we are utterly unable to face such a threat. We don't face it with opposite violence, but with a restored worldview.

Our restored worldview means that our faith extends beyond the borders of our suburban home and our family unit. Our faith must be equally self-giving, but this time for the common good, not for the common destruction. We must regain the cross and the view of faith that Jesus passed onto us, a faith that encompasses our whole social, economic and political lives, where we serve in self-giving.

Ignoring Jesus

Our view of salvation has often ignored the main teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus taught a holistic salvation, not individualism. He focused on our whole community. We have often said Jesus wasn't teaching the gospel, but was speaking about other matters, maybe a kind of "pre-evangelism" law, to ready the Jews for "Paul's faith message." First, we have misconstrued Paul, and then used him to misconstrue Jesus, just to maintain our individualism.

But Jesus spoke of a community being spearheaded and developed by the church, as the expression of the kingdom of God in the world. This would necessitate a complete reorientation, in which we lay down our own lives, and take up our cross, to put the interests of others first. This is what the scriptures call "redemptive living". It means self-giving, that draws in the sinners and enemies through a service community. This way of life demonstrates the gospel, in actual living, and opens the opportunity of renewal to our enemies.

Redemptive Community

Jesus spoke of a salvation that builds community and is redemptive towards enemies, building bridges to offer a regrafting of others back into the kingdom of God. This whole emphasis of the gospel intention is completely lost in an individualistic view of salvation. Salvation is about the whole community. It is about a redemptive life style towards the outcasts, that sees enemies as potential community members and inheritors of the salvation plan. Salvation is learning an inclusive, non-selfish, lifestyle. It is retraining our heart towards a renewed world, where self isn't first.

Ok. So, if salvation is not simply private, but includes the wider world in which live, how did Paul view salvation in his letters to the churches?

PAUL'S VIEW OF SALVATION

First, we need to know about Paul's background, from which he wrote his letters. He was a Hebrew. He didn't lay aside his Hebrew worldview when he was saved. We have often taught, that once Paul was saved, he laid aside his Jewishness and embraced Christ. Then we ascribed to Christ our own view of salvation, which is different to the Hebrew world in which Paul lived.

Hebrew Hopes

Paul did not lay aside his Jewishness. He kept to his Hebrew identity solidly. He saw the Messiah as the one who fulfilled his Hebrew hopes and all God's promises to the Hebrew people. Paul laid aside his Jewish nationalism, the kind of legalism that shut gentiles out of the kingdom. But not his Jewish hopes, not even his keeping of the Jewish law. He just saw that these hopes had been fulfilled in an unexpected way, in Jesus Christ.

Every day Paul prayed the shema. This is from Deuteronomy 6, "Here Israel, the Lord your God is one God and you shall love him with all your life... and your neighbour as yourself." These two were one law. When they asked Jesus, which was the greatest commandment, Jesus couldn't answer with one. He added love of neighbour to love of God, because the one is impossible without the other.

The shema was Paul's worldview. It was taken from the Torah. The Torah speaks of a salvation that is world renewing. It stems from the Hebrew view of wisdom and of the word/ logos of God. The word in creation, had returned to Israel through the Torah. Just as the word fashioned the original creation, it was refashioning the world through the Torah in Israel. They would love God and love neighbour, and enemy, and this new way of nationhood, would reveal God to the worldly nations. This was salvation to the Hebrew, a renewed creation.

Torah and Creation

But, as Paul says in Romans, the law couldn't achieve this goal, because of the weakness of our own lives. So, God had to write the law on our hearts. This, to Paul, is what the gospel is about. The gospel isn't the replacement of Torah, but the writing of Torah on our hearts, so that we will do it, as the shema says. The gospel is the fulfillment of shema. It has come so that Torah in our hearts will bring about a renewed community, a new creation. To fulfil the purpose of the creational logos.

There are many things we need to understand differently here. One of them is new creation. We have taught that new creation comes about by some sudden cataclysmic intervention of God, in which the kingdom of God comes suddenly, at some future time, and changes everything for us. The convenient thing about this view, is that we don't have to live in kingdom ethics now. We can go on living naturally, by our present worldview.

But Jesus said the kingdom of God doesn't come like that. It comes within us. It is the Torah written upon our hearts. Jeremiah said, that God would write his law on our hearts. This is how his kingdom comes. A new heart, means a new lifestyle towards our wider community, which means renewed community and ultimately a renewed world. This is how the kingdom of God comes. This means that we have some major part in it now, through our own lives.

It is true that the kingdom comes fully in the final resurrection, but how much of the kingdom is put off until then, and how much of it is to be revealed now by a renewing church, isn't totally clear. What is clear, is that we, as the church, are to be living witnesses, a prophetic community, of the kingdom to come, which has already come, by dawning in our own hearts and social lives. It is this witness, that is already meant to reshape our societies and nations today.

Renewing the World

There are other things we need to understand about Paul. Paul saw salvation to do with this world. He didn't see the promises of God to be fulfilled by us going to heaven. There is no passage in the bible that says the promises of God are to be fulfilled by us going to heaven. Paul saw God's promises to do with our land. God said he would bless their land. He said he would fill the whole earth with his glory. This is what Paul was writing about.

Romans is Paul's primary letter on salvation. We have located his main message in the earlier chapters of Romans, where Paul speaks of our personal salvation. But the main aspect of Paul's soteriology is in Romans 8. Here, Paul speaks of the church being revealed to the creation, through a new spirit-renewed life. Chapter 8 shows a people whose hearts have been renewed by Torah, so that we live out the Torah towards our communities and wider world.

This is Paul's soteriology. Paul claims, that the consequence of this Spirit empowered Torah community, even in our suffering, as we follow Christ, would be a renewed creation. He said, that the creation, meaning this world, would be delivered from its bondage to corruption. This means the curse, that is the result of our idolatry, in which we focus on ourselves, instead of on the true God and his true renewing nature. New lives would lead to renewed conditions in the world, meaning the curse and chaos would be driven back, just as it was in creation, in Genesis 1.

Throughout scripture, the first creation is used as a type of the new creation. John speaks of this in John 1. He says that the darkness cannot stand in the way of the light. He was referring to light driving back darkness in Genesis 1. And he meant that the coming of Christ and the spread of the church in the world, would have the same effect on the world. Darkness would be driven back from the creation. Good would overcome evil.

Salvation on Earth

This is what salvation is to Paul. Paul doesn't say anywhere in Romans, or in any other letter, that salvation is us going to heaven. He says it is the renewal of this creation. In other places, he says it is the resurrection of our body. Our body is raised up to inhabit and rule over this creation.

This brings us to the main Hebrew worldview. They saw themselves as living out the Adamic commission. God promised Adam and Eve that they would govern his creation. The Hebrew saw themselves as the people through whom God was restoring this original Adamic purpose. It was to do with our human call to steward this world in the image and likeness of God.

When Paul says, in Romans 3, that we have fallen short of God's glory, he meant our dominion over creation. This is the glory the Hebrew scriptures speak of, e.g. Psalm 8. "He has crowned us with glory and honour and set us over the works of his hands, the animals..."

When Paul said in Romans 5 that we have been restored to rule, by the grace of God, it is this Hebrew concept of the Adamic commission that Paul was speaking about. When Paul spoke of our final destiny, to be glorified, he meant the resurrection, to rule over God's creation. He did not mean in heaven. He meant a new heavens and new earth, brought together in Christ.

This also was how the early church saw salvation. When asked why they refused to serve in the Roman army, why they refused to take any life at all, they didn't answer because of the idolatry of Rome. They answered that they were the Isaianic people. They were beating their swords into ploughs now. The kingdom was coming to the world through the church community. Isaiah's

promises of a new world were being fulfilled through their lives. Wow, we have fallen a long way behind this today in our worldly empire view of Christendom.

SALVATION IN PHILIPPIANS

Philippians is a very good place to begin, to see how we have made errors in our understanding of Paul's message. One of the well known passages is Philippians 3. Here, Paul tells the church to beware of the dogs, those of the circumcision. He then claims that the true circumcision is that of the heart. He goes on to show that he is happy to lay aside his personal advantage, and embrace a salvation that comes by faith and the grace of God.

But when we look at this passage closely, we see that Paul was saying that faith was the basis of our communion, of our acceptance of each other with our differences. Paul was speaking about us breaking down our divisions, so we could build a common fellowship of service toward each other. This way, Paul's gospel of world renewal could be lived out in our Christian groups. The gospel here wasn't individualised justification, but group justice.

Confronting Individualism

In evangelical circles, what we have taken from this chapter, is firstly that the Jewish traditions are wrong. Those who practice such traditions are to be shunned. This view became stronger in the church after the merger of the church with the Roman Emperor, Constantine. Faith then became a matter of politics, and the dispossession of others. The Jews became a target, and the excuse was that they were heretics in their religious traditions. The synagogues were burnt and the Jews were persecuted. This "displacement theology" continued, on and off, up until the end of WWII.

Next, we have taken from Paul a doctrine of personal salvation by faith. Philippians 3 is one of our leading passages for this teaching. We have said that Paul was teaching about our personal salvation. So, from this passage, we have built a Christianity about our individualistic salvation. We have claimed that this is Paul's teaching on soteriology, his gospel. We have then narrowed down Paul's salvation teaching to this claim, that he was speaking about our individualistic faith and how we go to heaven when we die.

This is the opposite to what Paul was saying in Philippians. If we build a doctrine of the individual from this passage, which is exactly what we have done, we are building the thing Paul was writing to refute. It was this individualism that Paul was writing against.

The situation was, as the book of Galatians says, that certain had come from James, in Jerusalem. (Whether James sent them is another matter.) The people had gone around to all the churches, and were teaching that Jewish believers in Jesus, could not fellowship with gentile believers. They were told, that unless the gentiles were circumcised, and became Jewish believers first, they could not be accepted as equal in Christ. They claimed that Christ was a Jewish faith, and they had to become Jews first, before they could claim salvation in Christ.

Confronting Nationalism

They were teaching a doctrine of nationalism. It is not unlike the faith that many believe today. We believe in Christ, but also believe in our national and racial culture. The way we dress, speak, eat, and otherwise conduct ourselves. We sometimes claim that these matters are important for sanctification. One way or the other, we respect people, or not, based on whether they look like us, behave like us. Our fellowship and calls for justice, our concern for the welfare of others, our integration together in life, is often based on our national, racial, cultural or colour identity.

This nationalism of the Jews was individualism. They wanted to maintain control over the faith, just like we often do today. They wanted Jerusalem to continue to be the main pilgrimage centre, where

all the money, esteem and control was focused. They couldn't let the gentiles take this from them. They had to be first in the gospel leadership worldwide. It was this individualism that Paul was writing against.

Our interpretation of Paul was later extended to the Catholics in the Reformation. Till today, our rejection of all Catholics, because of their different traditions, is a tenant of faith among many evangelicals. To reject Catholics is an eleventh commandment, often the first commandment, that overrides the other commandments. And the reason is the same. Politics. It is to secure protestant control over our governments and wealth. We have misread Paul deliberately, until we no longer notice our mistake.

Principalities of Self

It is clear, that in all of Paul's letters, he wasn't writing against the traditions of the Jews. He himself was a Jew, and he kept those traditions. He still went to the temple, and shaved himself after making vows, according to the Jewish customs. He still circumcised Timothy, because of his Jewish parentage.

The thing that Paul was against was the individualism. He was against the Jews insisting that the gentiles become like them. He was against them not accepting others with their different traditions. This refusal of community, where we accept one another from our diverse backgrounds and cultures, was a form of individualism that is still common today. Paul was against it.

The reason why Paul was against this was because it undermined the gospel. Paul explained this in Colossians 2. There, he called our insistence on religious traditions, the rule of the "principalities and powers." In Paul's letters, principalities and powers, were all those things that divided people and created injustice, instead of fellowship. They were principalities and powers, because they were a self-centred rule in our hearts, bringing destruction to the common good. God has come to renew the world. These powers of division and self-centeredness must be brought down.

"Christ is now the head of all principalities and powers and we are complete in him." Christ fulfils what religious traditions point to. If we have Christ, we have the fulfillment of the traditions. Instead of arguing about circumcision and water baptism, whether, for example, we are baptised as an infant, or an adult believer, we have the real circumcision and the real baptism of the heart. This inward circumcision and inward baptism unites us as believers to care for each other. This heart transformation defeats the powers.

The point here is that we can treat others as having fulfilled those conditions. We don't have to divide based on our different traditions. Christ has fulfilled them, and made us complete in him. We can therefore receive each other. This was Paul's point in Philippians. His point was one of community, not our individualistic faith in Christ.

What Paul counted as dung, was his former individualism and the promotions it provided for him. His former advantage in the Jewish nationalistic faith, or his advantage as a Roman citizen, he counted as dung, so that we might follow Christ, serving his body, the whole church community. This is what he was telling the believers at Philippi.

Philippi was a major Roman city, of great advantage to special Roman people, some of whom were now coming to faith. What was once a great privilege for them, they would now have to lay aside, to embrace fellowship with the poor and slaves of the empire. Paul was giving himself as an example of the new community and our service towards each other. Paul's main example was in Philippians 2,

where Christ laid aside his privileges and served, laying down his life, even becoming a slave who died on a Roman cross.

Community Brings Justice

Why did Paul insist so much on this common fellowship? His message in Galatians was the same. It was when Peter withdrew from a common table fellowship with the gentiles, that Paul sprang into action to correct this. What was his reason? What was Paul thinking?

Paul was thinking about justice. He wanted to break down nationalism, and put in its place a people of justice. He knew that justice was only possible if our divisions were broken down, if we came together at one table and treated each other with acceptance and love in Christ. This open fellowship would provide care for each other.

The reason we divide isn't really because of faith. It isn't really because of holiness or godliness. It is because of self-centredness. We separate because of resources, to maintain our position in society and our privileges. This is the topic of Paul in Philippians and why the whole letter focuses on service. Faith, for Paul, is our door into family, into service, into becoming followers of Christ amongst the whole people of God.

Paul's Gospel

And this is exactly the position of Jesus in the Gospels, where he taught the Pharisees. The topic there was the same. They had shut themselves off from the poor, saying it was because of their traditions. They said it was for godliness. Jesus denied this. He wasn't denying their Jewish traditions, but the way they used these traditions to shut out the poor and the sinner from service and care.

So, why is Paul focusing on building one table of believers, to serve each other? This is where we get to the centre of Paul's thinking. It is because this, to Paul, is the gospel itself. Paul's gospel was a gospel of world renewal. It was a gospel where soteriology is the healing of our communities and relationships.

It was the same gospel Mary preached, in Luke 1. "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the poor from the dunghill." It is a gospel where we follow God, who condescended to serve his enemies and the outcast from society. Mary's gospel was one where the rich condescend and build one family with the poor, healing society and bringing us together as one.

This is the gospel that Isaiah spoke of. This is the healing of our nations. This was what Paul was preaching. Christ had forgiven us, and brought us into the family of God by faith, so that we might become followers of God, who came down to our level to lift us up. His purpose is that we treat each other this way, and break down the divisions and injustices that Satan uses to tear our world apart and destroy it. Instead, we become repairers of these breaches and restorers of our relationships and broken societies. This is salvation, or soteriology, to Paul, the renewing of our creation.

Correcting Our View

Therefore, if we use Philippians 3 as a passage to build our doctrine of individualistic soteriology, or individualistic salvation, we are in fact a long way out from what Paul was saying in that passage. We are, in fact, building a doctrine opposite to his intentions.

If we build a doctrine of individualism from Philippians 3, and use it to separate from others, and not care about justice for our neighbour, we have defeated Paul's whole gospel message. Paul was speaking about leaving behind his former teaching of nationalism and building instead a community

of faith, which included all believers, from different traditional backgrounds... to build a life of justice together, that would be a sign to the nations of the inbreaking kingdom of mercy to renew the world. This is Paul's soteriology.

This also points to our role in the world as believers. Our concern is not to maintain our national strength in the word, but to be a voice for the injustice that our national divisions and wealth structures create for the vulnerable. Paul's message locates the character of the church in the world. This is what we, as evangelicals, should be reflecting with passion and action.

The evangelical church must lay aside our fascist tendencies, our marriage to power, and become like the servant Christ in the nations. We are to take up our cross to serve, not use our nationalism as a cross for others.

And we must stop breaking fellowship with other believers because we disagree with them, or with their traditions. This pride of our faith must cease. This divisional nature of our denominationalism, for our personal advantage, must go. We are to receive each other in love, and eat and work together, as one body, for justice, mercy and love among all people, of all nations.

GLOBAL CHAOS – ROMANS

Coming to the book of Romans, we see a broad scope in Paul's view of salvation, or soteriology. We have traditionally narrowed this down to a message of personalized salvation. But that is because we haven't understood Paul's Hebrew position.

Military Gospel

The letter to the Romans starts by refuting the gospel of the Roman Empire. The Roman gospel wasn't unlike empire gospel narratives of today. Since Constantine, when the church joined state power, our good news has been mixed with the narrative of patriotism. Today it is mixed with the narrative of capitalism. These are narratives of individualism and tend to abuse the world, especially when compared to the kingdom of Christ, which "will not so much as quench a smouldering wick."

The Roman Empire was a gospel. It used the same Greek words Paul adopted to describe his counter cultural Christian movement. Caesar was the Son of God, who claimed he was bringing the kingdom of God to renew the creation. His birthday was celebrated as the gospel, the good news to the world, bringing peace, safety and justice to humanity. All nations were to have faith in Caesar and render their obedience to him, or suffer the decisive brutality of his power.

A Corporate Gospel

Caesar Augustus claimed to be the saviour on the world, bringing peace and safety. He was driving back global chaos. The nations had similar creation stories to Genesis. Order came to the world as the waters of chaos were overcome. These waters often represented the unruly nations, or the barbarian people. In conquering the world, Augustus was overcoming the chaos. This was their view of salvation. It was corporate and it was bringing heaven and earth together in a leader, usually called the son of God. The son of God was the one who brought heaven's rule to earth.

Paul was writing from a similar perspective. The Jews were hoping for a Messiah, who would come to the world for the same purpose. But he would bring order through Israel, and Israel's exaltation. Christ didn't deny this, but he claimed the kingdom of God was coming in a way entirely unexpected. Through peace. "The meek shall inherit the earth." Peace would be the means of peace. Most rulers, even to Hitler, try to make violence the means of peace.

"I will set his hand over the sea, his right hand over the rivers." (Psalm 89:25) This Psalm shows the Messiah coming to still the waters of enmity, and bring peace to the nations. He will bring peace to the waters of chaos and bring order and goodness to the world. This was the vision of Augustus. It was how people at that time saw salvation. But the true Messiah would do this through stilling the turbulent waters of human nature, of covetousness and rage, within the heart.

Paul, Not Luther

The question of Paul, was about how God would achieve this. If Israel was under the yoke of Rome, how was God going to fulfil his covenant promises to them, and to the world through them. This was what Paul meant by the righteousness of God, in Romans 1:17, "The gospel of Christ... is the righteousness of God to salvation..."

We have traditionally understood this in Martin Luther's individualistic view, but this wasn't what Paul was saying. The gospel is personal, but to Paul, it was also much more than that. Paul was speaking about the surprising way in which God was fulfilling his covenant promises of world

renewal. This was God's faithfulness, or his righteous action in fulfilling his covenant promises through Christ, for both the Jews and the gentiles.

Paul opens his letter by shifting the fulfillment of God's covenant promises from Caesar to Jesus Christ. Paul transferred all the Greek words Caesar assumed, e.g. for saviour, gospel, Son of God, faithfulness, righteousness, peace, safety... over to Jesus Christ. Paul was "not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first and to the Greek."

Here is the counter cultural movement. Paul wasn't ashamed of a man crucified naked as a slave. The Roman system of force mocked this. But Paul saw it as the kingdom of God. Christ was marginalised and rejected. The kingdom of God, that which renews the creation, is precisely following this Christ, bringing in the outcasts of the world, and caring for those abused by our systems of power.

Paul's question wasn't Luther's question. Paul wasn't consciously struggling with works righteousness, in the way Luther was, desperately seeking how he might be set free from that. He had an entirely different background to Luther and wrote Romans from a very different perspective. Paul's point, was about how God was fulfilling his promises of world renewal, since the Jewish people through whom God promised to fulfil them, were still under captivity to the world powers.

Salvation also meant what it meant in Paul's day. The term Son of God, which Paul attributed to Jesus Christ, didn't mean one we worshipped on Sundays, tucked away in a privatized faith, one who took us to heaven in a personalized salvation. It meant ruler of the world. It meant the one who was bringing God's new reign of peace and justice to all humanity, and thereby renewing the creation. This was the gospel Paul was speaking of.

Unity of Faith

Having opened his letter in this way, Paul spends the rest of chapters 1-4 bringing Jewish and gentile believers together into a unity of faith. We have portrayed these chapters as dealing with the sin of world and then with our personal justification. But this wasn't the purpose of Paul. In these chapters, Paul was dealing primarily with the Jewish community, of which Paul was a member.

The reason why Paul spoke of the sin of the world, was to show the Jews that they weren't any better. Paul explained the calling of Israel. The reason they had the law, wasn't to give them a prestige above others, but to reveal the heart of humanity to us all. The law, by strangely bringing about a hardening of heart, led to Israel's crucifixion of Christ, revealing to the entire world our human fallenness in general. This is how Israel served the world, and, as Paul says later, we should be humble, grateful to them for this difficult calling.

But crucifying the Lord brought about the second unveiling of the gospel, that is, of the righteousness of God. Though Israel fell, God remained righteous, forgiving Israel, and us all, by grace. He thus showed his forgiveness through his suffering, setting our conscience free to receive and share his love with a world in renewal. The gospel unveils how God has kept his covenant promises to Israel and to the world.

As Paul explained later in Romans, this grace did what the law could not do. Therefore, circumcision was set aside as the marker of God's community people, and love instead became the sign of our faith. This was the point of Romans 4. God's people was henceforth to include the uncircumcised. Romans 4 wasn't about our personalised salvation, but about the new border markers of the family of God. Jew and gentile were now to include each other in one family and set about bringing God's healing and care to their wider communities.

We see Paul's main task in Romans, not building our individualistic faith, but building a new family. He was breaking down the barriers of pride and exclusion, and building inclusion into our relationships. "God has accepted us, let us accept each other." This wasn't an "anything goes" salvation. But a salvation where joint caring, rather than legal exclusion, becomes the basis upon which God's healing penetrates and renews our lives.

Countercultural Care

The thing Paul was overcoming, was the false narrative of our worldly gospels. Like the gospel of Rome, these other gospels bring about exclusion, and the vulnerable become isolated and crushed. Our creeds of nationalism, gender and faith become borders of division. People, made in the image of God, become outcasts. As in all his letters, Paul was once again in Romans, bringing down these principalities and powers of world division and destruction, and building in their place a people of unusual, counter cultural care for those the world has left behind.

Paul's soteriology wasn't a reductionist, self-centred faith. It was a soteriology that renewed our heart towards our neighbour. It was a soteriology of the Law and the Prophets, where spiritual renewal means social renewal. The message of Paul was one where the nations become obedient. This reflected Paul's daily shema prayer, "Hear and do O Israel, you shall love the Lord (which means being creational, rather than selfish) ..." Love for God and love for neighbour. Now, all nations were included in the renewed Israel, obeying God through the Spirit.

We see the purpose of soteriology. It is to overcome the unjust and destructive nature of isolation. Isolating ourselves from others, like Rome did to the needy, is a form of hostility, even if passive. A reductionist soteriology is hostile, because it isolates us from the worldly, the sinner, the suffering and the foreigner. The kind of injustice this generates breaks the world into segments, wounding the heart and bringing hatred into relationships. The church, above all else, is to set out as healers in this kind of world, fashioning our lives after the reconciling act of God in Jesus Christ.

Romans is a brilliant tapestry about the journey of Israel from Egypt to the promised land. Paul announces the gospel with this history as its background, showing that Jesus Christ fulfils Israel's hopes. Israel passes through the Red Sea in Romans 6, into a holiness that is community focused, comes to Sinai in Romans 7, finds the law a road block to God's purpose, but then in Christ they come into the promised land in Romans 8, which is the renewal of the whole creation.

Romans 9-11 traces Israel's election, to serve the world by falling, but to be restored with the world through faith. Romans 12-14 were written with the Babylonian exile as its backdrop, about a renewed people in diaspora, submitting to "Babylon," while transforming the world's powers through a renewed fellowship. The whole soteriology is focused on God's promises to Israel, about a renewed creation.

HEAVENLIES IN EPHESIANS

This brings us to a discussion on what Paul meant by the heavenlies. The word is plural, just as heavens was plural in the Old Testament. Paul used the word several times in his letter to the Ephesians. He didn't use the word to designate a place. He used it to designate power.

The ideas of heaven and power raise false notions in our mind. We generally see heaven as a place to go to. In Greek thinking, the earth was wicked, and salvation was escaping the world to heaven. Non-Hebrew ideas came into our view. We became corrupted by Greek culture, which individualised our faith, making it self-centred. We changed the gospel, claiming God's aim is to take us out of the world to heaven. Even the resurrection of our body has been overthrown in many people's minds.

The idea of power has been corrupted. We have taken on a self-centred concept of heaven and a self-centred concept of power. God came in Christ to show us what power means. We still corrupt it, to mean force. When we say in these notes that heaven designates power, we don't mean God's use of force. God's power is entirely different to this human idea of power.

Heaven Means Rule

In the Old Testament, the highest heaven represented where God rules. It means the rule of God over the earth. Visions of heaven weren't of literal scenes, but of symbols, metaphors, about what heaven is decreeing and doing concerning earth's renovation and renewal (often also called judgement). Even in Revelation, heaven is seen in this pictorial way, describing what was happening on earth from God's perspective.

This doesn't mean that heaven is not a place somewhere. That kind of thing is outside our human frame of reference. The bible doesn't answer our curiosity. In scripture, heaven simply means God's rule over earth, and the values he rules by, nothing more. In scripture, heaven is not ever seen in Greek individualistic terms. The Old Testament never saw heaven as a place to go to when we die. Heaven was about a general world renewal for us all. The Hebrew spoke of heaven and earth in conjunction. They are to come together in Christ, and in the new creation.

Ephesians begins with Paul's blessing, showing that we believers have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ. This needs to be understood Hebrewly. It's like Paul's claim in Ephesians 2, that we have been raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenlies. This means, that though we are on earth, we are invested with heavenly power. This power isn't the power to curse our enemies, but to serve them.

The vision that Paul was portraying was the Hebrew vision, of God's rule and presence coming to the earth through his new people. It is the vision of Daniel 7, where after Christ was seated at the right hand of power, he ruled over the nations through his saints in the world. In Daniel, heaven also is depicted simply as God's rule and authority over the nations. God's redemptive and reconciliatory rule has come, and is coming, to the world, through the church. This is what Paul's blessings mean.

A Hebrew Vision

Ephesians opens with a reiteration of the Hebrew gospel, God's plan of soteriology, or what we call salvation. And this is the coming of heaven and earth together in reconciliation, in world renewal. This is what the Prophets said, "The glory of the Lord shall cover the earth." This is what the book of Revelation shows in the last chapters. Heaven and earth have joined for total renewal.

Even the first verses in Ephesians are a Hebrew blessing. “Grace and peace to you.” To people like Paul, this recalls the shalom of creation, the commission of Adam and Eve to bring that shalom to the world. This was still the Jewish view in Paul’s day, and what he believed was being fulfilled through the gospel of Christ.

The vision of Ephesians isn’t a Greek one, of the believers going to heaven when they die. It was a Hebrew vision, of heaven coming to earth through our lives. This is what the believers at Ephesus were seeing when they read the letter from Paul.

In chapter 1, Ephesians continued to unveil God’s plan. In verse 10, God is bringing together all things in heaven and earth. Heaven and earth are uniting in Christ. Heaven is renewing the world through the church. This was Paul’s gospel. This is what Paul meant by salvation. Paul concluded verse 23, by saying the church is Christ’s body, through which God fills all things. He is filling his whole creation through his new temple.

In the Old Testament, the temple was the place where heaven and earth joined. It was the conduit, where heaven flowed out from, into the nations. Paul was saying that the church is that temple. We are the place where heaven comes down to earth and renews all things. God fills his whole creation, by coming through his new temple people, out into the world.

God’s Wisdom

In chapter 3:10, Paul continues this theme. God is revealing his wisdom to the principalities and powers of the world. Whenever a Jewish person spoke of wisdom, they were referring to God’s creation. Proverbs 8, and many other texts like that, show us that God made the world through his wisdom. Wisdom speaks of God’s creational power. In the New Covenant, wisdom speaks of God’s new creational method.

We will see this later, when we look at Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. There, wisdom is God’s foolishness, or God’s weakness. It is his counter cultural plan. It is his cross. This was to renew the hearts and relationships of the Corinthian believers, and spill over from the church, into their communities, bringing a heavenly styled transformation to the world.

This is the wisdom, that Paul says in Ephesians, is being revealed to the powers of this world through the church. The powers of the world are those things in heavenly places that exert rule over humanity. They are multiple. Some are spiritual, as in Eph 6:12. We believe this means demonic powers, but it may also refer to impulses that control natural people, with destructive biases that go unnoticed until Christ opens our eyes. Spiritual powers have been dethroned through the cross of Christ, they have lost their power. But they struggle to regain their power, through deception.

Principalities of Division

The powers also include human governments and their manipulative deceptions which influence humanity. These things – propaganda, rumours, lies, selfish sentiments - are rife in our world today. The powers Paul mentioned also include our religious walls which divide us. Paul speaks of these in Colossians, as we have seen. Anything that rules over humanity, to divide and destroy our relationships, and frustrate God’s creational program of renewal in Christ, are called powers in the heavenlies, meaning above, ruling over human responses and behaviour.

In Ephesians, Paul speaks of God’s plan to bring all things in heaven and on earth into unity in Christ, for global transformation. This unity doesn’t mean we all act the same way, but that Christ’s life and nature become a reconciling wisdom between our different groups in the world. It is the same as

Paul's vision in Romans, where through the church, creation is delivered from its bondage to corruption. This is achieved through the church's new wisdom, which is a self-giving redemptive life style, that brings renewal to relationships and justice to our wider communities.

Manipulated Self-Interests

Paul claim about the heavenly powers concerns their rule within human imaginations, that seek to bring division and destruction to God's whole creation. These divisions are peddled within our cultures for the sake of selfish interests. This selfishness is the governing power that we are in captivity to. It works in our minds to deny God's creational wisdom of reconciliation, the self-giving wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount.

Ephesians 2 was an example of things on earth coming together in Christ. It was the Jews and gentiles. Previously, their religious traditions had separated them, acting as a power governing their refusal to serve each other, to bring justice to the world. But the cross had broken the dominion of these traditions. Paul called people to lay aside their nationalism, by which they had been manipulated into destructive divisions, and instead seek to heal each other. Because the Jewish leaders stood to lose considerably from this new arrangement, Paul was maligned for it.

Ephesians shows that God is calling us to put aside patriotism and our other self-centred dominions, and seek to bring healing to each other, through mutual care and justice. The church is to practice this within our own faith community, by bringing down these powers of division within our own hearts, and then allow this new wisdom to spill over into the world, renewing the powers that control self-centred destruction in our wider world.

We read Ephesians 6 in the light of the Hebrew gospel of world renewal that Paul was declaring. Resisting the powers and standing in faith, means resisting the self-centred persuasions that come to divide us from each other, and instead taking up a cross-centred posture of service towards the world. This is how the church reaches the sinner, not with stones. This overcomes satan's work of dividing and destroying. God's kingdom gathers and heals.

The result of our misreading Paul's soteriology, and misconstruing texts about heaven, is we develop a wrong posture in the world. Instead of renewing this world through counter-cultural leaven, we view salvation being fulfilled in heaven. This allows us to adopt more divisive ways of overcoming our challenges. We may turn to Moses to support this, and not to the Sermon on the Mount. We may look to Constantine for our salvation, and not to the self-giving wisdom of new creation.

REDEMPTION IN COLOSSIANS

We have typically seen redemption from a personalized perspective. We have seen that God has purchased us and bought us back to himself through the Passover, the blood of Christ. This theme is strongly put forward in Ephesians and in Colossians. And this is how we have seen soteriology. We are saved, redeemed by the blood of Christ. And that is true.

But once again, we need to see this through the background of Paul. When we see a redemption theme in Paul's writings, he was speaking about the beginning of this gospel story, the paradigm by which he and all Jews understood the work of Christ. That paradigm was the Exodus.

Exodus Redemption

In the Exodus, the people of God were purchased. They were saved and brought out of bondage and into a new land. In this new land, they received Torah, God's wisdom to dwell securely and renew their relationships, not only among themselves, but in the nations around them. They were bringing forward Adam and Eve's commission of shalom to the world.

That is, Israel's redemption wasn't just personal, it was as a group, with a group assignment to impact the world. When Paul spoke of redemption, this was what he was speaking about. He was asking how this Hebrew paradigm would be fulfilled. He noted the Hebrew hope, evoked by the Exodus from Egypt. This hope had somehow gone very wrong in Hebrew history. They had gone into captivity, even in Paul's day, under Rome. How was God going to put it right? How was God going to use the Hebrew people to fulfil his purposes in the world? Paul saw the gospel of Christ in relation to this question.

To the Hebrew people, the Exodus reflected strongly upon the creation in Genesis 1. In that creation, God rolled back the sea and the darkness. He brought order out of chaos. He made mankind as his priesthood, gave them a good land, and made it a temple for him to dwell in. From there, God's humanity was to reflect his image into the world, bringing his ongoing wholeness to all life.

The creation narrative wasn't just history, it was also written in a kind of Hebrew poetry. By parallelism, it spoke to Israel of their own calling. By bringing them out of Egypt, God was once again rolling back the waters (this time, the Red Sea) and overcoming the forces of darkness.

He was calling Israel to be his priesthood and tabernacled with them in their land, to renew the nations. With the Torah, they were to use God's creational wisdom, his renewing power, of care for the stranger, to renew the poor. This would bring justice and therefore peace to the nations. This was the wisdom of the Law and the Prophets. "The fruit of justice will be peace."

New Creation

The Psalms repeatedly saw the Exodus as overcoming the powers of darkness, mixed with creational language to show God's plan in making a new world through his people. Throughout the wisdom literature of the bible, like the Psalms, the Proverbs and Job, poetry was constantly used to reflect on God's creational purposes. Primary in this poetic story, was the place of wisdom, knowledge and understanding in forming, and reforming, creation.

Paul launched into his prayer for the Colossian believers. He retraced all the themes of creation in that prayer. He spoke of their wisdom. In Hebrew thinking, when wisdom is mentioned, creation and the reforming of creation was the topic. Paul was speaking about the believers' role in bringing rule and deliverance to our current world, reforming our creation in justice, living out the Adamic call in

Colossae, fulfilling the purpose of the Exodus of Israel. Paul was saying that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish hopes of new creation.

The use of the term wisdom, points not only to the commission of the church in the world, but also to our lifestyle. This wisdom, as we saw briefly in our previous section of these notes, refers to a wisdom of Christ. This wisdom is found throughout Christ's teachings in the Gospels. His teachings showed how the promised land would come about. It would not be by force, for that would not change our hearts, and enmity would continually arise in a cycle, just like it did in the Old Testament. It had to be by the values of a new kingdom.

Paul used terms like "hope, reserved in heaven." He didn't mean the gospel was about going to heaven when we die. He meant the consolation we have, knowing we are reconciled to heaven, despite what we face on earth. This draws us on to live a life of faith and love, to live by the values of heaven now.

It's like Jesus saying to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." His kingdom is for this world, but the values by which it thrives are not of this world. Otherwise, Jesus said, his disciples would fight for him. Reserved in heaven, means that the power of God will keep his church in the world, while we live out his wisdom in bringing renewal to our surroundings.

Wisdom of Reconciliation

This wisdom is seen throughout Jesus' teachings. We live in a reconciliatory way towards our enemies, instead of treating them with force. Yes, this may mean our own cross, as it did with Jesus, but it brings into creation a new tone, and exposes the darkness around us. This is the light John spoke of, when he said that light shines in darkness and the darkness cannot resist it. John was speaking of the same kind of church Paul was writing about.

Jesus spoke about serving the man on the road to Jericho, Lazarus at the rich man's gate, inviting our enemy to our table. In Hebrew culture, Jesus was following the Old Testament Prophets, about a wisdom that builds a new world. "Wisdom has built its house, and filled it with every good thing." This Proverb referred to creation, and also forward to the life and teachings of Christ. By forgiving our enemy, by suffering and serving in return, we are God's light of new relationships and thus new creation. This is what God is like. This is his wisdom.

When the bible speaks of wisdom, it is speaking of that which builds new community, which brings shalom to our world. The wisdom of God is simple. It is, "Bring in the poor and outcast and there will be peace on earth."

Skill of Peacemaking

But it also takes skill. This is what the bible means by, "He teaches my hands to war, and my fingers to battle." It is this battle of wisdom that builds peace. Anyone can destroy. To reconcile enemies takes skill. God wants to teach us the skill of redemptive living, even in hard places.

James spoke of this wisdom, to be lived if Jerusalem was to be saved in his time. He said, the wisdom from below responds by what seems good to one's own personal advantage. The wisdom from above responds by what seems good for our neighbours, the "royal law." This is where healing comes from. This is how a house is built and filled with good things. This is the wisdom that builds God's temple, meaning God's house, or renewed creation.

The Old Testament tabernacle was a microcosm of the universe. The tabernacle/ temple had depictions of the sky and stars of heaven and of plant life and animals on earth. It was the place where heaven and earth came together, where healing came to the nations.

And it was built with skill and craft. "See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills." (Exodus 31:2-3)

This was Paul's prayer for the believers of Colossae, that God would fill them with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. They would be building God's new house to dwell in, a place where heaven and earth come together in global healing.

Paul used terms such as "light, Spirit, word and darkness," all taken from Genesis 1, to show that the church was God's new creation project. The church was God's restored Israel, returned from captivity in Babylon and Rome, redeemed by an everlasting Passover, to complete Adam and Eve's creation project.

Paul then continued in Colossians to explain more about what it means to have our inheritance reserved in heaven. Christ created all the powers of the world. Coming to Israel as a man, he took on Israel's death in exile on their behalf, and was restored in resurrection, for us all. This places him above all the powers that held God's renewing people in captivity. He now rules above them, above Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and all the powers of our own time.

There is now no power on earth, or in heaven above, that can take away our inheritance in Christ. But this doesn't mean we will be affliction free. We may be persecuted on earth, but our inheritance is secured in Christ, by a higher power. As members of Christ, we also bear the afflictions of the powers, just as he did. In this way, the church also embodies God's reconciliatory nature in the world he came to renew. This is how his renewal comes.

Image of God

In Col 1:24-25, Paul told the Colossians that he followed Christ's afflictions, as the church brings a transformative service into the world. The same is outlined in Romans 8. The world is delivered from its corruption, during the church's own sufferings. At the same time, the Spirit is working to transform us into the image of Christ. The image of God means the self-giving dominion that God showed us in Christ. He is bringing the church into this same image in the world.

Paul's soteriology includes our redemption from the dominion of the powers, to become part of a family that bears rule in the world according to the image of God seen in Jesus Christ. This rule, depicted in the book of Revelation as sharing thrones with Christ, is lived out in service in the world. It is a rule by transformative relationships, which is the true power of heaven that inherits the world. "The meek shall inherit the earth."

The soteriological project reconciles everything in creation. It is to bring peace to all things in heaven and upon earth. (Col 1:20) All things in heaven are reconciled. This means heaven itself, where God is. The Old Testament heaven, the heaven that in the fearful human mind was shut off from ourselves, has passed away. A new heaven has come. God has acted in Christ to reconcile our conscience with heaven, by revealing forgiveness, acceptance and love on the cross.

All other powers of the heavenlies are also reconciled to us. The accuser who ruled us through the law has been defeated by self-giving love. Now, with the law written on our hearts, we are

empowered to live new reconciling lives, transforming the former powers which ruled over us: governments, cultures, religious traditions, patriotism, the dominion of all self-centeredness.

Our new power in the heavens, in the place of control, means we can reconcile all things on earth. This is our relationships with others. We have a new reconciling living, the wisdom Jesus revealed to us in his teaching and life, by which we bring together a broken world for healing. We see this in the church in the book of Acts, setting a table where caring relationships become the chief priority, above all the former powers.

Naked Powers

“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” (Col 2:15)

The word here for disarmed means to strip naked. It’s another one of the paradoxes in the kingdom. It shows the way God fights. It shows that his weakness, or foolishness, in the world’s eyes, is wiser than man. It shows he overcomes by love and not by hate, or by the weapons of this world. It shows us the wisdom of his new creation, the armour that we ourselves are to wear.

When Christ was stripped naked, and hung to die as a slave, this act brought the destruction of the powers that ruled this world. This is speaking of spiritual, human government, and religious powers, that ruled the world in brutality and force.

First, the spiritual. Satan’s hold over us, the condemnation of the law, which ruled the human conscience, was shown to be a false power. Satan, "the great ruler," was stripped naked by the cross. The love of Christ towards those who hated him, showed that God does not hold the law against us. This condemnation was shown to be a false power, by the love of God which overcame it.

Second, the human governments. Rome held itself to be a just and worthy ruler of the world. The crucifixion put this lie of our human empires on public display. It’s the same today. Any world power that claims to be doing justly, is measured by how the weakest and most vulnerable people in the community are being treated.

The cross uncovered the brutality of human power, compared to the self-giving love of the God of heaven. The nakedness of Christ stripped the powers naked, and exposed them before all history. The cross showed Rome to be a false power. The cross has become the measure of all human leadership from that day to today. No single leader can escape that reality. The cross is the greatest renewing power in the world. The weakest action of God achieves the greatest good ever. Wisdom!

Third, the cross showed the nakedness of our religious traditions. These religious powers were laid bare on the cross. Though we claimed these traditions, in this case, circumcision and the laws of Moses, made us holy, the crucifixion of Christ displayed publicly their bankruptcy. The religious powers that divided us were seen for what they really were, our excuses not to serve the weakest and most vulnerable, who we instead cast out as sinners.

God is building a new creation today, by laying these powers bare before us, so we will embrace Christ and his self-giving wisdom, to love and serve our neighbour and enemy. This is all he calls us to do. This is his soteriology, his true salvation, working in our hearts by faith, and outward into our communities.

Corinthians – Closing in on the Powers

In Corinthians, we get a closer view of the powers at work in the world. The powers were a frequent theme in Paul's letters. This was important to the Jewish worldview. God promised to deliver Israel from the powers, notably the empires that held them in captivity. Paul shows how God has done that in the gospel.

Powers Within

The powers took on a heavenly theme in Paul's writings. They were those things that controlled humanity. Not just the pagan empires, but powers above them. Not just things in the hearts of the rulers of empires, but things in the hearts of us all. Not just things in the gentile nations, but even in the Jewish people, the ones who were supposed to be God's instruments of salvation to the wider world. They too were part of the powers of darkness of this present age.

In Corinthians, Paul zeroes in on the powers in the heavenlies. The word means above, in the sense of to rule over, or to control. The Corinthian people were being controlled by their own passions and desires. It may have been the god of this world pulling their strings, but the powers were at work within them. This place of control is within our own natures. The powers are within our characters. Freedom is being set free from the inside, not being set free from Rome.

The Corinthian people have the dubious honour of being the ones through whom we learn the most about these powers. In Paul's other letters, we get only short lists describing these powers. But in Corinthians, we get whole chapters, one after the other, describing in detail how these powers were at work within the hearts of the Corinthian believers.

For example, in Ephesians, Paul told us to put off the old man with his deeds. He gave a brief list of the works of the flesh, encouraging the believers to simply lay them aside. It was the same in Colossians. These works of the flesh are the powers of the old world, that is coming to an end, that is being renewed and transformed. These are the powers that control our lives, and bring us destruction, until we are translated out of this darkness, into the kingdom of God's love.

Wrong Wisdom

Corinthians begins with a reference to the divisions within the church. Groups within the church were trying to be wiser than others, to exalt themselves above others. This launched Paul into a discussion about God's eschatological program. God's program for the world was opposite to that displayed by the Corinthians.

First, God will destroy the wisdom of the wise. God's plan through the church is to replace worldly wisdom, with his wisdom. This is what saves the world. His soteriological plan for the world is simply to do with wisdom. It is his wisdom of condescension, permeating the world through the church, displacing a wisdom of self-importance. This is what renews our relationships, and brings care to the poor and outcast in our societies.

Paul's discussion on wisdom continues into the second chapter of Corinthians. It shows us, from Paul's Hebrew perspective, that Paul was speaking about the believer's role in bringing about new creation. But before they could do that, the new creation must begin in their hearts and fellowship.

God's wisdom is foolishness to the world. It is condescending, rather than self-exalting. The world mocks this kind of wisdom, even people in churches often do, just like they did at Corinth. But what is considered as nothing to the world, is the actual power of the gospel. That which the world

despises is bringing to nothing the powers that are destroying this world. This condescension is overcoming the powers that hold the world captive.

“God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are.” (1 Cor 1:28) This is God’s soteriological plan. He has chosen to destroy the powers of this world, and bring them to nothing in our nations, not by might and force, but by the wisdom of the cross, by the very acts of humility that the world despises.

Focus on the Lowest

God has chosen to shift our focus of attention, away from the powerful, towards the lowest of our communities, towards the poor and outcast. This is the wisdom that saves his creation. This is the wisdom Paul wanted to show the believers, which is why, in chapters 12-14, he called them to focus on the lowest members within their congregation, not the ones that who lift themselves up. This is God’s eschatological program, as it was with Mary, to bring down the mighty and to lift the lowly.

Part of the background to the Corinthian issues was the “super apostles.” These were career preachers who came into town after Paul had begun the churches at Corinth. They had doctrines that appealed to human nature. Suffering was out. Prosperity and personal fulfillment were in. It was a spirituality where, because Christ had done everything for us, it was only left for us to reap the benefits for ourselves by faith. Faith was to live the good life.

Because of Christ, the Corinthians were to live like kings who had arrived. These false apostles pretended to be more spiritual than others, more powerful. They claimed that Paul was in the flesh, because he didn’t practice the same rigour of spirituality. These false apostles were called the spirituals. Their real purpose was a coup, to take the affections of the Corinthian people away from Paul, so they could use the people for their own comfort, prestige and financial advantage.

The self-centred way of life of these spirituals had affected every part of the Corinthian churches. Paul had to win them back. In chapter 4, Paul launched into a strong defence of the gospel, contrasting godly wisdom, with their boastful wisdom.

“We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.” (1 Cor 4:10-13)

These are the two wisdoms contrasted. The earthy wisdom is destructive. It leaves behind the poor. The heavenly wisdom is fatherly and motherly. It cares for the weak as children. The first destroys the world, the second rebuilds the world, by rebuilding the lives of the vulnerable. Paul suffered because he put himself in harm’s way, to reach others. The spirituals prospered, because they protected themselves from the suffering around them.

Paul refused to take offerings from the Corinthian churches for himself. He said he had every right to. He quoted Moses, about not muzzling the ox. But Paul still didn’t use his right. He laid it aside, to reach the people. He wanted their hearts, not their money. This is true apostleship. He was condescending, just like Christ laid aside his divine rights to serve us. Paul was following Christ, with a wisdom that serves. False apostles gather followers, but they teach them selfish faith.

Restricting Ourselves

Chapter after chapter, Paul proceeds to expose the powers in Corinthian churches. First, there was destructive immorality. Next, there was a believer suing his brother to court. The desire for possessions ruled them, rather than the desire to forgive and restore fellowship. These are the very powers that destroy creation. Next, it was food sacrificed to idols. We have a personal right to eat it, but what action would best serve the community?

This is where Paul gives a warning from Israel's history in the Wilderness. As the people gave way to their passions, they fell into destruction. It wasn't God who destroyed them. He didn't punish them. God doesn't put us under restrictions. It is our own passions that restrict us. These passions lead us into paths that ruin us. They become controlling powers. God is simply showing us, by his own example, the life that sets us free. That life is overcoming the powers of self-centredness.

Genuine Communion

Chapter 11 is one of those central passages to the letter. It's about the Lord's Supper. This was what mattered most to Paul. We have somewhat individualized the "communion" in our time. We are told that to judge ourselves means to have a time of personal introspection, before eating a little biscuit and drinking a little juice, or God will judge us. I don't think this is what Paul was saying.

When Jesus broke bread, he told the disciples to share it among themselves. When he gave them the wine, which was Jesus' own life given for us all, he told us to follow his example. This means we are to share our lives with one another, and give our lives for each other. We are to do for each other, what Christ did for us. This is the church. Jesus became broken bread to feed the world. This is what we are to do for others.

Communion wasn't a little ceremony, like we often have today. It was a main meal. It may have been the central or main part of their gathering together. Their meetings may have been very different to the kind of individualistic group meetings we often have today.

But something went wrong with the Corinthian gatherings. They stopped waiting for each other, especially for the poor. The poor may have been slaves. Their masters may have kept them late. The rich went ahead and ate the food and became drunk, and the poor went hungry. This is what Paul meant by judging ourselves. Not introspection, but how we are treating others around us.

Paul said it was for this reason that many were weak in the congregation, and many slept. They weren't being cared for. The weak and poor members among us are a testimony of our lack of community. The Corinthian believers had let the very powers of Rome, that is, ambition and self-interest, come into the church. What is the point of overcoming the eschatological pagan empires, if those empires exist in our own Christian fellowship?

How can Corinth renew the world of its powers, and bring about new creational relationships, when those worldly powers thrived in their churches? Instead of bringing the powers to nothing, the powers were thriving among them.

Renewing Powers

The table was at the very centre of early church fellowship. It was the most critical issue to Paul. It was why he rebuked Peter, for withdrawing from table fellowship with the uncircumcised. The table was where we all become one; African and European, rich and poor, free and slave, female and male. This is where we get to know each other, and start to show mercy to each other. This is what

empire refused to do, and still refuses to do today. So, God rose another community to spread social justice through sister/ brotherhood.

But what use is brotherhood, when it is brotherhood only until my national interest intervene? That is not brotherhood. Someone is not my brother, if our national interest can separate us. That isn't the church. That's a pretence. The powers are still controlling our lives, if that is how we relate to each other.

By and by, the bankers separated from the table of fellowship, because they became embarrassed at how the farmers were treated by the banks. They started a new fellowship, called Bankers For Christ. Then they separated into their national groups, because they had to follow the interests of their own country. Over the years, the churches have gone, and clubs have taken their places. These clubs have been built on the values of the world powers.

These principles of true communion in our fellowships, reflect on the church's identity in the world. We aren't to build nations that leave the poor behind, at home, or in other nations. We aren't to build suburbs, where we can live and forget about the suffering in other places. We build a world where we wait for the poor, before we eat and drink. This is the character of God and if we aren't reflecting that character in this world, we aren't God's eschatological people, whom he has called to bring about a new type of creation.

The true sacrament, the true communion, the true witness of the coming kingdom, which has already dawned in our hearts, is our love for one another. This love, which is practically lived out daily, is the sign that we are the people of the kingdom. It is the sign that Christ is coming back to this world, to make all things new. It is the sign of the coming resurrection of all flesh. The church's task is to bear witness to this kingdom. It is not our task to save our own skins and nations.

Self-Promotion

Paul then traces these same self-promoting values through the charismata in the Corinthian churches. The spiritual gifts were being used for self-promotion. The prominent were getting attention in the churches and the lowly were being ignored. But in God's kingdom, the lowly are first, and the prominent are last.

This is where Paul puts in his classic love poem. The powers are overcome by love. Love is patient, it does not seek its own, it does not put itself forward. It suffers all things. Love does everything opposite to the super apostle spirituals. This is the kingdom that renews all things and it starts in our own relationships, and then spills over into our nations, renewing our governments and cultures. But the light of this is in the church. If we lose this light, then the world is in darkness.

Enemies Subjected

Finally, in chapter 15, this is how all Christ's enemies are placed under his feet. (Psalm 110) It isn't by force, but by the church living out the same reconciliatory life that we see in Christ. He overcame his enemies on the cross. We place them all under his feet, by the Spirit, through our renewing lives in the world. These warfare prophecies of the Psalms are transformed by the gospel. The warfare is against our selfishness, against the enmity in our own souls. Once that is gone, the kingdom comes.

This is Paul's soteriology. Christ overcomes the powers of the world within our souls, within our fellowships, and within our communities. This is how he reconciles all things to himself.

These powers are in the heavenlies, because we put them there. We make them gods. We make self-centred ideals about life into idols, and we lift them into high and prioritized places, where they

begin to rule over our lives and determine the steps we take. These steps then have consequences for our character and destiny.

The self-centred powers in Corinth bought division to their relationships. They were divided by their false leaders. They were divided by their greed. They were divided by their classes. They were divided by their spirituality. In their divisions, they drew away from each other into groups... and these groups today become contentious camps within our wider communities.

The powers that rule over us, bring destruction to our nations. When we behave like those at the Lord's Table in Corinth, and leave the poor behind, our societies and nations fracture into groups. This eventually brings about suffering, without care from the rest of us, nor cure. We say they belong to another group. This leads to bitterness and eventually to anger and hatred. From this comes the terrorism, that tore Jerusalem to pieces in the first century, and then the Roman war to finish it off.

This is happening in our own world today. The church has largely lost its biblical vision, and instead of turning to Christ, to adopt his forms of cure, we turn to our nationalism, and then to Constantine to fight our wars. God is calling us to bring resolution to our lives an unusual way, by the principles of his kingdom, by the cross, by the wisdom of God.

God is calling us to overthrow the powers that overthrow us. Wouldn't it be great if we could begin to see the cross this way? Instead of an angry God punishing his Son, the cross is the wisdom of God in new creation. The cross and the resurrection of Christ were the launching pad for heaven breaking into our world, bringing us back together in God, and revealing to us the wisdom of God to follow.