

The Plan of Salvation Through the Ages

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The Plan of Salvation Through the Ages

By Dan Lash

Down through the ages, what is the message that people believed which resulted in their being justified?¹ What is the content of saving faith? Does the content of justifying faith change from one dispensation to the next or does that content for the most part remain the same? The purpose of this publication is to demonstrate that the content of the faith that justifies has, throughout the dispensations, remained consistent. The faith that has always justified is faith in Christ as our sacrificial substitute. Those who in every dispensation have hoped for eternal life have based that hope on God's provision of The Christ as their suffering substitute.

The Faith of the Patriarchs

When studying the content of the Patriarchs' saving faith, this is the mistake most people make: they open their Bibles to the Old Testament, and assume that the Old Testament was the source of divine truth for the people of old. Then they come away from such a study thinking, "Oh those poor, poor people who lived before Christ! How very little light they had; it is a wonder that any of them ever believed!" Most Bible students come away from such an Old Testament study concluding that it was harder for the people of former dispensations to come to faith because they had such very little light. In the process, they either unwittingly charge God with partiality, having given the person living in the church age more gospel light; or they come up with a butchered definition of faith for the pre-church-age believer.

We make a fatal mistake when we try to impose our source of revelation today upon the patriarchs. What many fail to take into consideration is that God provided the patriarchs a different source of divine revelation than he has for us. The sources of revelation for the Patriarchs were God's prophets. As we read in Hebrews 1:1, "God, who at various times and in various ways

¹ Let me start out by saying this: the proper term to use when discussing the plan of salvation and the position of a person who has positively responded to God's plan is the term *justified*. *Justified*, when speaking of a person's eternal status before God, is the term which, in all dispensations, is used to denote a person who has a positive eternal status before the Father. A person who is serious about studying from the Bible about how a person is saved really needs to acquaint himself with the doctrine of justification by faith, because being declared righteous by God is logically, the first in a sequence of simultaneous events which occur when a person is born again.

spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets.”² When a patriarch wanted information about God, he didn't open a book, he ran down a prophet.

According to Scripture, all of God's prophets proclaimed the message of the coming Divine Person, born of a woman, suffering for our sins. Read carefully Peter's words to the Israelites in Acts 3:17-21:

“Yet now, brethren, I know that you did [it] in ignorance, as [did] also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

Just because a prophet didn't write it, doesn't mean he wasn't saying it. Just because we don't read the Gospel being penned on every page of the Pentateuch, doesn't mean it wasn't being universally proclaimed. Notice once again Acts 3:18 "But those things which God foretold by the mouth of ALL His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled." God foretold by whom? The mouth of ALL the prophets; and what was every prophet before the Church age proclaiming? That Christ would suffer. That's right, all of God's prophets proclaimed a coming Christ who would suffer for our sins. By the way, how far back do such prophets go? Read ahead to Acts 3:21:

“...whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.”

Notice that since the world began, God has had on this earth His prophets. No generation of mankind has ever been without a witness or source of God's soteriological truth. According to Acts 3:18-24, since the world began, God has been proclaiming salvation from the effects of sin. Oh, we may not read it in every page of the writings of Moses, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaimed it to be so.

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The Lord Jesus underscores the antiquity of the witness of the prophets, in a context in which he is condemning the nation of Israel and the world, in Luke 11:49-51:

“Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and [some] of them they will kill and persecute,’ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation.”

Notice whom the Lord considered to be the first martyred prophet: Abel, the second son of Adam. Also, it may very well be that Adam was the first prophet; but for certain we know that the second-born child of Adam was a prophet; and like all the other prophets, his voice foretold of a coming man who would suffer, in our behalf, for our sins.

Here is another passage that we would do well to consider: the Holy Spirit utterance of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, which he uttered after the naming of baby John. Luke 1:68-70:

“Blessed [is] the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who [have been] since the world began.”

The term *horn* in this passage is speaking of a human descendant. Notice once again the antiquity of the salvation message in Luke 1:69-70:

“And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who [have been] since the world began.”

Since the world began, God has been promising, through the mouth of His prophets, a Savior, a descendant of Eve, who would undo the effects of the fall. The Lord told the serpent in the hearing of Eve:

“And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;

He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

It is obvious in Scripture that Eve understood that a descendant of hers would undo the power of sin that Satan had instigated in the Garden. In fact, her reaction to the birth of Cain might suggest that she thought he might have been God's provision for her sin. In Genesis 4:1, upon the birth of Cain, she exclaimed, "I have begotten a man from the Lord".³ Certainly the Old Testament believer had much more information about God's ultimate way of salvation than what we see recorded for us in the Old Testament.

According to the Scripture passages we have thus far considered, since the world began, the prophets of God have been proclaiming the coming One who would, by suffering in our behalf, undo the consequences of the fall. The prophets of former times understood that, in order for God to undo the effects of the Fall, Christ Himself would come through the seed of the Woman, who would personally grapple with our sin and put away sin's ability to forever alienate us from God.

Consider 1 Peter 1:10-11:

“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace [that would come] to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.”

Consider carefully what this verse is saying: the prophets prophesied of the grace that would come to us. The next verse tells us what form the prophets understood that grace would take. The Spirit of Christ who was in them was testifying concerning the sufferings of Christ, and the glories that would follow.

Now consider the sum total of what Peter here is saying: God was revealing to His prophets of old, that one day God would, according to His grace, undo the consequences of sin. This work of grace would come in the form of the Christ suffering for our sin; and following that suffering, there would be a reversal of the effects of sin, not only upon the individual, but also on the creation itself.⁴

³ It is worthy to note that Eve was expecting a man “from the Lord.” Could she have already been expecting the appearance of her Savior?

⁴ The “glories that would follow” is obviously a reference to the Earthly Kingdom in which Christ would reign and the curse would be removed from the land of promise.

It can safely be stated that even the last prophet before Christ, John the Baptist, articulated the concept of a suffering Messiah to His disciples. Listen to how he points out the Messiah to His disciples:

“Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’” (John 1:35-36)

Obviously, John the Baptist had been articulating to his disciples the concept of the suffering Messiah. In fact, those words were all that two of John’s disciples needed to hear to immediately abandon John and follow the Lord. There are those who would argue that the disciples had never understood the concept of the suffering Messiah. More likely, they lost sight of this truth. Like many believers today who lose their prospective on grace, thus the disciples let this core issue of their salvation slip.

It is not surprising that the disciples should let slip the truth which John the Baptist had taught them concerning the Lamb of God. If you had just spent three years with God enrobed in flesh: a Person so perfectly humble, perfectly loving, perfectly kind, perfectly meek; and that Person began to tell you how spitefully He was about to be treated; if you were an off-the-cuff man like Peter; you, too, might be ready to clean a few clocks before stopping and recalling that the events which were transpiring before you were divinely ordained. After all, the twelve were not trained theologians. They were fresh disciples of John the Baptist; and, as such, not yet firmly established in the gospel.⁵

However, there is a big difference between saying that the disciples didn't understand the Lord was to suffer and saying they never understood He was to die. The alacrity with which the Apostles forsook their earthly careers would indicate a persuasion of whom Jesus was⁶. The presentation by John the Baptist to the disciples of Jesus as the Lamb of God would indicate that they had, at least at that time, understood the concept of the Messiah's suffering; but the teachings of John the Baptist was to, in no way, prepare them for a three-year whirlwind tour with the second person of the Godhead. Apparently, the teachings of John the Baptist had been long forgotten by the time the Lord's ministry had concluded. The disciples were so taken with the Lord's presence in their midst that personal categorization and application of

⁵ See subject matter in this book under sub-topic *Did the neglectful Israelite have a way of escape* to understand how the unlearned disciples qualified as disciples of the Lord.

⁶ John 1:³⁵ Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples.

³⁶ And looking at Jesus as He walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

³⁷ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.

truth took a back seat. It wasn't until the Lord departed from their midst and subsequently sent His Holy Spirit that the disciples actually recalled and categorized that which the Lord taught them.

The truth of the matter is, the disciples' experience before the Resurrection of Christ and their receiving of the Spirit causes a bit of tension in everyone's theology. I mean, how in the world could eleven men, constantly in the presence of Christ, so consistently not have a clue? Part of the reason is because they were not trained men. As Isaiah said of them in Isaiah 28:9:

“Whom will he teach knowledge?
And whom will he make to understand the message?
Those [just] weaned from milk?
Those [just] drawn from the breasts?”

Truly the apostles were not seasoned theologians; they were disciples of John the Baptist who had not yet matured past infancy.

Another factor impacting the blindness of the Apostles is the fact that they did not yet have the realities of the New Birth operating in their lives; that is, the new man and the indwelling resident Teacher residing on the inside. Jesus said to the disciples in John 16:12-13:

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear [them] now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.”

Unlike today, with the presence of the Holy Spirit and a new person abiding on the inside of the believer, the apostles had none of these resources enabling them to assimilate the teachings of Christ. It is not until the indwelling and filling of the Spirit that they were enabled to function as God's authoritative teachers to the body of Christ.

The Core Issue in Gospel Preaching

Before we continue, let me comment on why a study concerning the consistency of the presentation of the plan of salvation down through the ages is important. The faith which justifies, in every dispensation, must contain the answer to the most desperate, but unanswered, question in man's conscience: how can I, a sinner, be right before God? Before a person can exercise faith, there must be an internal conviction that the holy, righteous God demands a righteousness which that person can't even come close to

duplicating in his own life. This is the knowledge of sin that the Apostle Paul so completely develops in Romans 3 as the indispensable prerequisite to faith.⁷ It is this internal self-condemnation that creates receptivity to the message of God's grace. The message of Christ having satisfied, in a person's behalf, the righteous demands of the Father against his sin is the answer for a sin-smitten conscience. To make the focus of saving faith anything else than Christ, the all-sufficient substitute, is to proclaim a message which does not address the need of a conscience condemned under the guilt of sin.

The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:18-21:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where [is] the wise? Where [is] the scribe? Where [is] the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”

Notice in verse 18 what is the power of God unto Salvation: the message of the Cross. It is the MESSAGE of Christ's intercession in our behalf for our sins, which the Holy Spirit uses to illumine a guilty conscience to the point of exercising saving faith. Without the illumination of the message of the cross, faith cannot be exercised. Notice also in this passage the means by which God saves an individual: **by believing the message**. What message? The message of the cross. Any gospel presentation which does not draw a person to forsake his own righteousness and embrace the righteousness which God has provided through the sufferings of the Christ is not a gospel presentation which can effect the New Birth.

Before we leave the consideration of this context, let us consider what Paul considered to be the bare bones information needed for saving faith. In verse 26 Paul makes this statement about his audience:

“For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, [are called.]”

Because of the limited sophistication of his audience, Paul in I Corinthians

⁷ Romans 3: ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

2:1-2 states what he considered to be the most basic yet most potent component of the saving message to the Corinthians.

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

It is the message of Christ crucified which in the mind of Paul constituted the bare-bones message of faith.

The Message of Grace in the Four Gospels

It is not long before the diligent student of the Word of God discovers something which, on the surface seems to be a serious omission in the four Gospels, namely the preaching of the cross seems to take a back seat, if it is even there at all! This confusion concerning the presentation of the gospel arises primarily for several reasons.

We cannot forget that all four Gospel narratives are an account of the ministry of the Lord Jesus in the midst of His people during the closing of the dispensation of the Law; and what happens at the closing of a dispensation? A judgment. Every dispensation begins with a revelation from God, followed by a period of time in which God gives the participants in the dispensation an opportunity to respond, and then concludes with a judgment from the Lord. Jesus came into this world at the conclusion of the dispensation of the Law; a time for Israel to be called into account for that truth which God had already entrusted to them.

The Lord Jesus ministered during a time of judgment for Israel; a time when the Israelites were being called into account for the light that had already been entrusted to them. This is why we see the Lord not directly telling the Israelites who He was. In fact, time and time again we see the Lord sternly charging His disciples to tell no one concerning what they had discovered: That Jesus was the Christ. As we read in Matthew 16:20,

“Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.”⁸

⁸ The stern warnings to not tell others the Lord’s identity were hardly isolated incidents. Consider also Matt 8:4, Math 17:9, Mark 8:11-12, Mark 8:22-26, Mark 8:27-32, Mark 9:9, Mark 8:30-31, Luke 9:21 and Luke 9:31-36. These and other incidents should cause us to realize the unique nature of the Lord’s ministry among His covenant people.

Time and time again in the Gospels, we see the Lord sternly charging the twelve and those whom He healed to not reveal to others His true identity. Some formula for evangelism! I mean, if as John states in 20:31 of his Gospel, “these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life in His name;” if that is the formula, then why is Jesus telling His disciples not to tell anybody?

It is because the Lord wanted the Israelites to discover His identity through the light they already had: the Old Testament Scriptures. The Jew who had exercised proper diligence in their Scriptures would discover the identity of Jesus by observing His works. However, the Jew who had not given the Scriptures proper attention would remain in a state of spiritual blindness.

This truth explains why the Lord spoke to the people in Parables. As we read in Matthew 13:10-13,

“And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with [their] eyes and hear with [their] ears, lest they should understand with [their] hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.’”⁹

⁹ By the way, the parallel reference in the Gospel of Mark adds to our understanding of the Lord’s purpose for speaking in parables. Mark 4:12 “so that ‘Seeing they may see and not perceive, and hearing they may hear and not understand; Lest they should turn, and *their* sins be forgiven them.’ The forgiveness and healing that the Lord had in mind in these parallel contexts is not so much the salvation of the individual as much as it is a reference to the gathering of his people into His kingdom. The Israelites, because of their neglect of the light, which was already at their disposal, were not suitable candidates for conversion into the soon appearing Messianic Kingdom. Certainly the door was open to the individual Israelite to forsake his association to what had become an apostate religion, and humbly start afresh in the light at the feet of Jesus. But the Israelite who insisted upon seeking the praise of his fellow countrymen rather than the light that Jesus taught was destined for destruction.

So the Lord Jesus unfolded truth in such a way as to bring to a close the opportunity for the neglectful Israelite to continue to function as an ambassador of God; while, at the same time, providing additional light to the Jew who had been attentive to the truth, (an Old Testament saint) in order that such a saint might experience the abundant relationship Christ died to provide.

The Lord did not develop for the Israelites the message of His sufferings because He expected them to already be familiar with that message. As we read in Luke 19:42-44:

“If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things [that make] for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Of course that which was to be accomplished for their peace was that sacrifice He was about to accomplish for them. According to Luke 19:44, the nation of Israel forfeited their special status before God because they were not already familiar with the purpose for His visitation, which was to accomplish the things necessary for their peace! Or how about these verses in Luke 24:25-26:

“Then He said to them, ‘O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?’”

From these two passages we can see that the Lord expected the Israelites to have already possessed total familiarity with His sufferings, even though we do not see the reason for His sufferings developed in the gospels. The time of His visitation was not a time for re-seeding the message of grace; it was a time to harvest into His kingdom those who were already familiar with it.¹⁰

¹⁰ Some of the most personal encounters of the Lord are with those who already possessed a justifying faith. The individual addressing Jesus as “Lord” or “Son of David”, demonstrating a pre-existing faith in the coming One, usually characterizes those encounters in the Scriptures. Two such encounters occur in Jericho; one while Jesus was entering the city and one while Jesus was exiting the city in Luke chapters 18 and 19. When you consider the throngs of people pressed around Jesus and the fact that he stopped the entire procession to deal with only two people demonstrates that the Lord had a prior knowledge of the faith of both the blind man and Zacchaeus. The Lord’s invitation of Himself to lodge with Zacchaeus would have been a bit presumptuous, had He not already known the faith of Zacchaeus and the fact that Zacchaeus’s answer most certainly would have been yes.

It was also the intention of the Lord to bring to an end the false shepherds and false religion of the nation of Israel. Those who put the continuance of their power and prestige¹¹ over submission to the message of the Messiah were to be cut out of the Kingdom of God. Notice the conversation that the Lord had with the Pharisees in John 9:39-41:

“And Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.’ Then [some] of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, ‘Are we blind also?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, “We see.” Therefore your sin remains’.”

This passage identifies for us a purpose for Jesus' first coming of which many believers are not aware. Not only did Jesus come as Savior of the world, but He also came into the world to judge the false leaders of Israel. The Lord was not going to tolerate any longer His sheep being shepherded by hirelings. As the Lord said of these false shepherds in Ezekiel 34:10,¹²

"Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I [am] against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them”.

The Lord was going to no longer tolerate His sheep being abused by the leaders of the land. These Pharisees, who claimed to have the answers, needed to forsake their prideful religion, allow themselves to be persuaded by the messianic credentials of Christ and learn as disciples at His feet . Their refusal to forsake their false religion and embrace Jesus as their Christ was the cause of their destruction.

We also see in the Scriptures the Lord not holding those with previous

¹¹ The Lord's continual exhortations to fear God rather than men was necessary because of the peer pressure most Israelites felt to conform to the religion of the day. As Jesus exhorted in Luke 12:5, “But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him”.

¹² Ezekiel chapter 34 is probably the most important chapter of the Old Testament to understand to put the earthly ministry of Jesus in its proper context. The Shepherd is saving His lost sheep from the sloppy shepherding of the hirelings and gathering those sheep for His Kingdom. Ezekiel 34 serves as an indispensable backdrop to comprehending the earthly ministry of the Lord.

little light to the same standard. A good example of this is in the healing of the demon-possessed man in the country of the Gadarenes in Mark chapter 5. Unlike the central regions of Israel, where the Lord, upon performing a healing, told the recipient to tell no one, in a remote region of Israel, when the Lord healed a man from demon possession, He commanded that man in Mark 5:19 to "Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you." Truly as the Lord stated in Luke 12:48: "To whom much is given, much will be required."

These several principles considered together constitute one reason why the light which the Lord gave to His people was measured: the Lord was, on the one hand calling into account the Israelites, forcing them to recall their Scriptures to recognize who He was, while at the same time not holding those with little previous light to the same standard. Jesus was not trying to prevent the Israelite from coming to faith; but He required that faith to be drawn from the light previously committed to them in the Law and the Prophets. To the person who previously had little access to light, the Lord openly spoke to them of His Messiahship; but those who had the light of the Scriptures and the prophets at their disposal, He called into account concerning their attentiveness to that light.

So the Lord Jesus measured the dispensing of truth for reasons that are not easily understood by many believers today. Consequently, many believers come to the conclusion that, because the Gospel presentation in the four gospels is not right out in the open like it is in the Epistles of Paul, then the object of saving faith for them must have been something other than the suffering Messiah. The truth is, the people to whom the Lord was reaching out already had the message of the suffering Messiah at their disposal, and now the Lord was requiring of them an accounting concerning that message!

By the way, notice how the Lord taught His disciples when they weren't in the midst of a neglectful Israelite audience. In John 16:29, in a context where only the eleven apostles were with Him, in the upper room, after Judas had left, His disciples said to Him, "See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech!" So we see in the Gospel narratives Jesus teaching in such a way so as to force the Israelites back to their Scriptures to gain a recognition of whom Jesus was.

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Another reason we do not see the Gospel message of a suffering Messiah taking prominence in the four gospels is the prominence of the Gospel of the Kingdom, which was a different message with a different purpose. Quite

frankly, the declared purpose of the earthly ministry of both John the Baptist and the Lord was the preparation of a Jewish people to participate in the long anticipated earthly Kingdom of Israel. As the Angel of the Lord announced to Zacharias concerning his son John the Baptist in Luke 1:16-17,

“And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Of course this was precisely what the Old Testament prophets said the ministry of John the Baptist would be as we read in Malachi 4:5-6:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children. And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

By the way, we now know from the Scriptures and from history that, because Israel would not receive their King, instead of the Kingdom, as they wanted, they got the curse, as prophesied in the last verse of the Old Testament.

Not only did the preparation of a people ready to occupy the Kingdom take prominence in the ministry of John the Baptist, it was also the dominant message of the ministry of the Lord Jesus. The Lord's and John the Baptist's primary ministry was focused upon gathering an assembly of Jewish saints with which to usher in the long anticipated earthly Kingdom, as the Lord answered the miracle-seeking woman in Matthew 15:24, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Most theologians have tried to Christianize the four Gospels in an attempt to make all the teachings of Jesus directly applicable to the church age. By doing so, they create a great deal of confusion over all that Jesus taught. We cannot forget that Jesus came as a fulfillment of the expectation of the law and the prophets. "Plan A" in the revealed will of God was the re-gathering of His people and the establishment of the Kingdom.

Probably no better example of this fact is in the Lord's continual reference to the *lost sheep* of Israel. The Lord's desire was to gather together His sheep (that is, justified saints), purify them and with them establish the earthly Kingdom of Israel. To understand the significance of the Lord's reference to

the *lost sheep*, it is necessary to go back to the Old Testament. Ezekiel 34:11-16:

For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord GOD. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment."

According to Ezekiel chapter 34, a purpose of the Lord's earthly presence was to seek out His sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered, gather them from the countries and feed them on the mountains of Israel. And we, time and time again, see the Lord's actions and teachings consistent with these prophecies.

This sheds a lot of light on John chapter 10 doesn't it!

Then Jesus said to them again, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who [ever] came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:7-9)

This passage is in direct fulfillment of Ezekiel 34:14: a passage referring to the Lord re-gathering His lost sheep of Israel. *Being saved*, in this context is being gathered by the Lord into His glorious Millennial Kingdom. *Going in and out and finding pasture* is a reference to the safety and abundance the Israelite will experience during the earthly kingdom. Truly the Son of Man was seeking and saving that which was lost.

This should shed some light on the word *lost* as it occurs in the Scriptures. Most people define a lost person as someone who is not justified. Usually in the Scriptures a lost person is an Old Testament justified saint who had not

yet discovered the identity of the Messiah.¹³ Also, according to these contexts, during the time of Jesus' offering of the Kingdom, for a Jew to be saved meant he was to enjoy an entrance into the earthly kingdom in a flesh-and-blood body. The careful student of the word of God should be diligent to not confuse the Jewish concept of *saved* with the church age concept of *saved*. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, for the Jew to be saved meant that he was to be afforded a physical entrance into the earthly Messianic kingdom.¹⁴ For the church age, Gentile believer to be saved means, that through faith in Christ he is transferred from the domain of darkness and forever enrolled as a citizen of the heavenly kingdom. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of II Cor. 3:3 in the King James Bible, the term *lost* is not used outside of the gospels to refer to the position of an individual before God. This is because it was a term used by the Lord to refer to His sheep who had not yet heard their master's voice, and not a person who was on his way to eternal alienation from Him.

The whole point is this: the reason we do not see the doctrine of grace being developed in the four gospels like we see in the epistles is because the plan of God as revealed in the law and the prophets was for the Messiah to establish the Kingdom with Israelites who were already looking for the mercy of God in the person of the Christ. This is the plan which John the Baptist and Jesus were executing in the Gospels. When the Israelites as a nation rejected their King, then the Lord executed a plan which would judge that disobedient nation; and instead, entrust the message of grace to an assembly of Gentile believers: the Church. Not until we read the epistles of the New Testament do we find grace systematically taught and not taking a back seat to the record of the Lord's mission to gather his covenant people.

¹³ Even in the 3 parables of Luke chapter 15, each of the lost articles had a prior relationship with the person who regained them. So these stories cannot be used to teach the salvation of an individual with no prior relationship to the Lord, rather, they are indicative of a recovery of a relationship, and the joy that accompanies such a recovery.

¹⁴ This is true in each of the synoptic Gospels until the Lord's withdrawal of the offer of the Kingdom in Matt. 23:38 (alluded to in Matthew 21:43), Mark 12:9 and Luke 13:35. Up until these passages, the hope of the earthly Israelite was a flesh and blood entrance into a soon appearing earthly Kingdom. After these pronouncements, the future hope is the resurrection. It is interesting to note that the term "resurrection" does not occur in the synoptic Gospels until after the Lord withdraws the hope of a soon appearing Kingdom. The exception to this rule would be the passages that occur in the context of the great tribulation. These contexts would, once again, address the hope of a tribulational age saint of a physical entrance into an earthly Kingdom in a flesh and blood body. "He that endures to the end shall be saved" is not a new means of justification available during the tribulation; rather it is the requirement for a tribulational age Israelite to enter the Kingdom in a flesh and blood body. This is not to say that the Israelite who dies during the tribulation will go to Hell; it simply means that the Jewish saint who dies during the Great Tribulation will gain his inheritance through the resurrection, in an immortal body and not by surviving the great tribulation and thus entering the Kingdom in a physical body.

The Message of the Cross in the Gospel of John

Let's go to the Gospel of John and see if, like the Apostle Paul, faith in Christ included the concept of a Messiah suffering in our behalf. As I have previously mentioned, we shall see that even though faith in a suffering Messiah is indispensable to saving faith, the teaching of the Lord assumes His sheep already have a familiarity with that concept. Like in the other Gospels, we see the Lord executing eschatological "Plan A", which was to gather together His sheep for the earthly Kingdom.

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” (John 3:14-18)

Notice it is the "lifted up" Son of Man upon whom people are called to believe. Once again, to find the significance of this term, we need to let Scripture define Scripture. John 12:32-34 reads,

“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all [peoples] to Myself.” This He said, signifying by what death He would die. The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how [can] You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?"

Notice that the concept of a suffering Messiah was foreign to Christ's Jewish audience; which, quite frankly, is why they were condemned.

One additional point needs to be made about the designation "Son of Man" in John chapter 3. "Son of Man" is a reference to the human lineage of the Lord Jesus. Just like it was prophesied way back in the Garden of Eden, the Savior was of a unique but human origin. A unique descendant of Eve, the seed of a woman (with no mention of a man's seed) was to be the perfect offering for sin. So, in John 3:14, the "Son of Man" is a term to denote the long anticipated, uniquely begotten Savior of mankind. So now in this passage, the Lord Jesus identifies how his long anticipated suffering was to be carried out: He was to be crucified.

So John, in chapter 3 of his gospel, states that the object of saving faith was the Son of Man who was to be lifted up for the sins of the world. So we see in the famous John 3:16 passage, the object of saving faith was the crucified Son of Man.

The Backslidden Evangelist at the Well

What about the woman at the well? Certainly she did not understand the concept of a suffering Messiah, or did she? One thing we need to consider about this narrative is that Jesus went out of His way to visit this village of Samaria. Normally, a purebred member of the tribe of Judah would avoid traveling though Samaria. Samaria was the land of backslidden, rebellious Jews, who had been away from the pure Jewish faith for so long that they had built their own temple on Mount Gerazim and were, in fact, operating a rival religion. But in spite of the rival religion, there apparently were some in a village in Samaria who were looking for the Messiah; so Jesus went there.

He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria. So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. (John 4:3-50)

The Lord was resolute on visiting this Samaritan city of Sychar because it contained a contingent of people who possessed the justifying hope of a coming Messiah but had not yet met Him in person. This can be demonstrated from verse 42 of this account, which reads,

“Then they said to the woman, ‘Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard [Him] and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.’”

These Samaritans were looking for the Savior of the world. Not just the Savior of the Jews, but also the Gentiles. This response indicates that even before the visit of Jesus, these Samaritans (including the woman) had been looking for the Savior of the world. The universal provision of the Messiah for the entire world was a prophetic concept that not even the Apostle Peter

grasped until Acts chapter 10!¹⁵ So apparently, these Samaritans already possessed a justifying hope and as lost sheep needed only to learn the identity of their Messiah to be gathered into His fold.

Indeed these people were "easy pickin's" for the soon-appearing Kingdom. As Jesus said to His disciples in John 4:35-36,

"Do you not say, 'There are still four months and [then] comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together."

In so many words the Lord was saying of the residents of Sychar, "Wow! What a harvest!"

By the way, notice in John 4:25 it is the *woman* who first reveals her Messianic hope. She said, "I know that Messiah is coming." There is only one context in the Old Testament which actually uses this Chaldean term "Messiah" for the coming Savior, Daniel 9:24-26, a context, by the way, which clearly articulates the soteriological benefits of the Coming One.

"Seventy weeks are determined
For your people and for your holy city,
To finish the transgression,
To make an end of sins,
To make reconciliation for iniquity,
To bring in everlasting righteousness,
To seal up vision and prophecy,
And to anoint the Most Holy.

¹⁵ Faith is having a handle on God's perspective. In the Gospels the more a Gentile demonstrated to the Lord his grasp on eternal realities, the more greatly the Lord honored his faith. Non-Israelites who none-the-less demonstrated a Messianic hope were usually recipients of the Lord's greatest praise. One such account is the woman in Matthew chapter 15 and Mark chapter 7, who engaged the Lord Jesus in a debate about the timing of His blessing of a Gentile, i.e. herself. When the Lord apparently loses the theological debate (of course He didn't lose the debate, He was merely testing the extent of the woman's faith), He exclaims that her faith was great and grants her request (Matt. 15:28, Mark 7:29). She, by her response to the Lord, demonstrated that she, like the citizens of Sychar, had a grasp on the fact that Gentiles would eventually be direct recipients of the blessings of the Christ. Another example of a Gentile with great divine perspective was the Centurion in Matthew 8:8 who asked the Lord to come and heal his servant. The Lord's willingness to be sidetracked and go and tend to the needs of this Gentile already demonstrated that this was no regular Gentile. But when this Gentile stated that his duties too involved the receiving orders and the dispatching of soldiers (demonstrating that this Gentile understood the relationship between the Father, the Lord and His angels) the Lord exclaimed that this man had the greatest handle on divine realities of any man He had ever met!

Know therefore and understand,
[That] from the going forth of the command
To restore and build Jerusalem
Until Messiah the Prince,
[There shall be] seven weeks and sixty-two weeks;
The street shall be built again, and the wall,
Even in troublesome times.
And after the sixty-two weeks
Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself;
And the people of the prince who is to come
Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.
The end of it [shall be] with a flood,
And till the end of the war desolations are determined.
(Daniel 9:24-26)

Incidentally, a Samaritan woman already in possession of a Messianic hope would explain why the Lord could have guaranteed to this woman (after His resurrection) the promise of the indwelling Spirit just for the asking.¹⁶ We know today that the Holy Spirit is not given to indwell an individual for the asking; rather the Holy Spirit is automatically sent to permanently indwell a believer as a result of the New Birth, which occurs simultaneously with faith in the Gospel, but what about the person who possessed a justifying faith before the resurrection of Christ? Such a person would not need to again be justified. After the resurrection of Christ, to that individual, the gift of the indwelling Spirit could be theirs for the asking. After His resurrection, the Lord was desirous for His disciples to obtain this newly-granted gift for believers. In John 20:22, we read, "And when He had said this, He breathed on [them,] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Passages like this are very confusing until we understand the unique situation of people who existed during the time of Christ, who had exercised faith in God's anticipated provision, but had not yet discovered Christ's identity.

The Samaritan woman, in her past, had believed in the Coming One but had not maintained her perspective; and had subsequently backslidden into an immoral lifestyle. Nevertheless, her conversation with the Lord and the reaction of the townsmen indicated that she had previously hoped in the coming Messiah. Notice the Gospel narrative in John 4:28-29:

¹⁶ Actually even if the Samaritan woman would have then asked, the gift of the Holy Spirit would not have been dispensed until after the resurrection of Christ as John explained in John 7:38-39: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."

But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet *given*, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?"

Some would object to this interpretation of the account of the Samaritan woman because of the conversation which the Lord had with this woman in John 4:20-23:

“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.” Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”

However, this above conversation was not directed at the woman in particular, but rather at the Samaritans in general. This can be demonstrated by the use of plural pronouns in verses 20 through 23. The woman interjected this sidetrack in the conversation in an attempt to deflect the conversation away from herself and re-focus the conversation on an argument about whose religion was right. As a pastor, I can't tell you how many times I have had believers try to pull that one on me, seeking to deflect attention away from their own sin by pretentiously engaging me in a discussion on doctrine. This doesn't make them lost, but neither does it make them the spiritual giant they are trying to pretend to be. But, unlike such believers today, the Samaritan woman did immediately abandon her pretense upon coming to grips with who Jesus was. In so many words this woman admits to her countrymen in verse 29, “He already knew what a hussy I was; this must be the Christ!”

The point of the discussion about the citizens of Sychar is this: we do not see the doctrine of substitution being taught to these people because they already understood it. The fact that they were already anticipating the arrival of the Savior of the world indicates that they had already been doing some serious contemplation in the Old Testament.

The Gospel in John 6

Once again, as in other conversations that the Lord had with the Israelites, we shall see the sufferings of Christ mentioned but not developed. Again, this is not by accident. Consistent with His dealings with the Israelites, He seeks to cause them to draw upon the light they already had at their disposal in the Law and the Prophets.

Consider the following passage:

“This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.” The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this [Man] give us [His] flesh to eat?" Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6:50)

Notice, in this context, the Lord associates His saving work with the giving of His body and His blood. This can only be a reference to His work on the cross for sin. Notice also in verse 53 that He makes the personal appropriation of the value of the work of the cross indispensable to saving faith: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you". Those who teach that saving faith need not include the concept of substitution need to again consider here what the Lord is saying. The faith which saves is the faith which appropriates for oneself the value of what Christ, in our behalf, accomplished on the cross for our sins. The Lord Jesus Christ on the cross satisfied the righteous demands of the Father against our sins. God accepts, in our behalf, the completeness with which Christ offered Himself for our sins. According to this context, if our faith does not appropriate the sufficiency of Christ's work, we have not yet exercised saving faith.

So why didn't Jesus just come right out and explain it as clearly as I just did? Why is the indispensability of the cross referenced, but not explained? Once again, the Lord expects His sheep to already understand mercy, through the light they already had. If the Israelite had been serious about the light from the Law and the Prophets, then the additional light that the Lord was dispensing in their presence would make His identity clear. As the Lord said in Matthew 13:11-13,

“Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”

It should not surprise us that the Lord treats in this manner people who are apathetic toward the light. He will do it again at the conclusion of this dispensation. As we read in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12,

The coming of the [lawless one] is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

Did the Neglectful Israelite Have a Way of Escape?

A tension that often arises from the teaching of the previous section is this: did the Lord's judgment upon the neglectful Israelites prohibit them from coming to faith? Was it too late for the neglectful Israelite to be converted? The answer to that question, I believe, is *no*. There was still opportunity for the neglectful Israelite to come to faith. However, they were not able to come to faith without first forsaking their false, nationalistic religion and then starting out with a clean slate, so to speak, at the feet of John the Baptist or Jesus. In fact, I believe this was the situation with the twelve apostles.

I believe the Lord makes reference to this fresh start in Matthew 18:1-5:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

Consider also Luke 18:17:

"Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it."

From the above two verses we can see that, indeed, the Israelite could come to faith; but not without first unloading the baggage of false religion they were carrying with them. Most Israelites were too steeped in the pretense of their false religion to humble themselves in this fashion and lose the esteem of their fellow countrymen.

I believe the Lord held out this possibility of a fresh start to the Pharisees in John 9:39-41.

And Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." Then [some] of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains."

In other words, as long as they pretended and confessed to have all the answers, they were not eligible to be made to see. But if they would assume the position before the Lord of a spiritually blind person, repent of their prideful religion, and follow the Light of the World, they might have opportunity to believe and thus become sons of the light.

The primary purpose of the blinding of the Israelites was not to keep them from being saved; but rather, to prevent them from continuing in the role of God's special people. They had forfeited that role through unbelief, and now it was time to shut down the divine enablement which caused them to be able to function in that role. The Israelites would not, at this time, remain as God's special people to proclaim His wonderful salvation to the ends of the earth in their own special nation. Because of their unbelief, they were in the process of being shut down, so they could no longer function as the ambassadors of the Lord. However, the individual Israelite, who would forsake the religion of that generation of Israelites and embrace the salvation offered in Christ, could still function as a special person: not as a citizen of Israel, but as a member of the body of Christ.

I quite often like to demonstrate the truth of the above paragraph by quoting Romans 11:7-14.

What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written:

"God has given them a spirit of stupor,
Eyes that they should not see
And ears that they should not hear,
To this very day."

And David says:

"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
A stumbling block and a recompense to them.
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see,
and bow down their back always."

“I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation [has come] to the Gentiles. Now if their fall [is] riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke to jealousy [those who are] my flesh and save some of them.”

Notice in the above context that the purpose of the blinding of the Israelite could not have been to prevent them from coming to faith. If that was the case, then how could the apostle Paul in Romans 11:14 have stated that it was His desire to see many of those who had been blinded saved? Once again, the purpose of the blinding was not to keep the individual Israelite from coming to faith; rather, it was to keep the Christ-rejecting Israelite from continuing on as the ambassador of God. The apostle Paul also said in 2 Corinthians 3:14-16,

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the [veil] is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

What Was the Content of Abraham's Faith?

Many students of the Word are troubled when they turn back to Genesis chapter 15 and read the conversion account of Abraham, because they don't see contained in that context all the information a person would need in order to be saved. Well, how many times in the New Testament do we have in one context all the information we need in order to be saved? Granted, the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 15 might come close; but even in that passage we do not have any truth which would lead a person to the knowledge of sin, an essential prerequisite to saving faith. So we should not be surprised when we turn back to the conversion account of Abraham and not find "the four spiritual laws" explained immediately before faith, especially since we don't find such complete gospel narratives even in the New Testament.

God has never committed us to just one context from which to glean the sum total of salvation truth. I suspect the reason this is the case is so we are not tempted to transform the process of coming to saving faith into a ritual. I mean, why didn't God just append a gospel tract to the Bible after the Book of Revelation? Isn't God interested in people being saved? The reason God

didn't is because a person is not saved by a ritualistic exercise of faith. Rather, before a person comes to faith in Christ, he comes to grips with some core issues concerning himself and God.

For example, before a person comes to faith, he must become convinced of his sin. Before faith, there must be an internal conviction that the Holy, Righteous God demands a righteousness which we can't even come close to duplicating in our own lives. This is the knowledge of sin which the Apostle Paul so completely develops in Romans 3. It is this internal self-condemnation which prepares the soul for a fertile implantation of the message of the Gospel.

Quite often, a person is born again when a missing, but essential, truth is provided. People usually don't come to faith upon the first hearing. Usually there is a missing component in the apprehension of grace which is keeping them from being saved. For the household of Cornelius, it was the universality of the invitation. For the Bereans, it was a lack of persuasion without first consulting the Scriptures. For the Pharisee in the account of the Pharisee and the tax collector, it was at least a failure to come to grips with his own depravity.¹⁷

As Paul proclaimed in 1 Corinthians 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." The truth of the matter is we don't lead anyone to faith; the Holy Spirit does. What we do is witness the necessary components of saving faith. We should not be surprised when we see salvation accounts in the Scriptures with what we consider to be incomplete gospel information; because, quite possibly, the person hearing the message already has certain components of saving faith abiding upon his heart. For example, what was the missing truth that was keeping the household of Cornelius from getting saved? Let's look at the account.

Then Peter opened [his] mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word which [God] sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ -- He is Lord of all -- that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power,

¹⁷ Here is yet another reason why a suffering Messiah may not be a dominant theme in the four gospels: how many Jews during the time of Christ had to have the concept of substitution and imputation of sin taught to them? The Jews regularly had that message reinforced through their sacrifices. They understood the imputation of sin, the missing components in their faith coming to grips with their depravity and coming to grips with who Jesus was.

who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, [even] to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God [to be] Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:34-43)

Cornelius already understood grace. Peter said in Acts 10:36-37,

"The word which [God] sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ -- He is Lord of all -- that word you know..."

Cornelius already understood the provision of Christ for the Jews and how the sacrifice of Christ had once and for all settled the sin issue for Israelites (proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ). But what had not yet dawned on Cornelius was the universality of the provision (He is Lord of all). Cornelius had understood grace as an outsider but did not understand that, as a Gentile, he could be a direct beneficiary of Christ's sufferings.

The missing component of Cornelius's perception of grace was the universality of the invitation; which was the whole point of the vision which Peter had in Joppa. Peter HIMSELF needed to be persuaded that the gospel message was also for the Gentiles. What made the gospel click with Cornelius was WHOEVER! When Cornelius became persuaded that he, a Gentile, could embrace salvation, he immediately appropriated the value of the work of Christ and was instantaneously born again.

Now back to the original question: what was the content of Abraham's faith? To answer this question, especially in light of what we have just discussed, let us go to other Scriptures and see what they tell us that Abraham understood. We do not have to rely only on Genesis 15 for that answer; rather, there are several other witnesses who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, demonstrate that the content of Abraham's faith was, for the most part, identical to the faith that today results in justification. Let's consider each passage separately and see what each reveals about each individual component of Abraham's faith.

“But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began.” (Acts 3:18-21)

As we have already demonstrated in this article, since the world began, the prophets of God have been proclaiming a suffering Christ, a horn of salvation. From the verses that follow it would be safe to assume that Abraham was quite aware of the preaching of these prophets.

“Blessed [is] the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited and redeemed His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of His servant David,
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets,
Who [have been] since the world began,
That we should be saved from our enemies
And from the hand of all who hate us,
To perform the mercy [promised] to our fathers
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to our father Abraham:” (Luke 1:68-73)

Notice in the above context, the oath which God swore to Abraham contained the concept of mercy. Mercy is God's kindness towards those who merit judgment. By the way, it is important to note that nowhere in this account in the book of Genesis do we have mention of mercy. Once again, this demonstrates the fact that the patriarchs had truth concerning grace that is not mentioned in the Old Testament narratives concerning them. Let's consider now the first mention of grace in the Old Testament narrative concerning Abraham.

Now the LORD had said to Abram:
"Get out of your country,
From your family
And from your father's house,
To a land that I will show you.
I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great;

And you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
And I will curse him who curses you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

At first glance you might be tempted to say that I was "stretching it a bit" if I was to dogmatically conclude from this verse that Abraham understood the gospel. Well, fortunately, you don't have to take my word for it; you can take the Holy Spirit's word for it, as penned by the words of the Apostle Paul:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, [saying,] "In you all the nations shall be blessed." (Galatians 3:8)

Does not the Apostle Paul in this context mean to assert that the gospel that Abraham believed is the same message that we believe?

This quotation in Galatians is from Genesis chapter 12, and not 15, which demonstrates the point previously made. The gospel information that Abraham acted on in Genesis chapter 15 was accumulated and categorized from a series of prior revelations (unless you believe Abraham was saved by believing he would have lots of posterity). Abraham's descendants being as numerous as the stars of heaven did not constitute the saving components of his faith. The saving components of Abraham's faith had been accumulated through a series of previous revelations. Don't forget, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:8 states that the gospel that Abraham believed was contained in Genesis 12:3, "in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed." With all the information that Abraham previously had, perhaps it all came together in Genesis chapter 15.

Actually, between Genesis 12:3 and Genesis chapter 15, where we have the first mention of Abraham's faith, Abraham also constructed at least three altars upon which to offer sacrifices for sin. Now, where did Abraham get that idea? Nowhere before Genesis chapter 15 do we read of the concept of substitutionary sacrifice being explained to Abraham. Again, this demonstrates that the Old Testament narrative omits much concerning how Abraham gained his faith. What we know for certain is that the content of his faith which resulted in his justification was practically identical to the faith which today justifies.

So it is from several Scriptures that we discern what was the content of Abraham's faith. Abraham believed in the horn of salvation promised since the world began (Luke 1:69). He believed that through a descendant of his, salvation for the world would be provided (Gen. 12:3). He believed that the

coming One would perform an act of mercy through which Abraham would be justified (Luke 1:54-55). We can see Abraham understood the concept of substitutionary sacrifice for sin between Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 15:6, since he built three altars upon which to offer sacrifices for sin.¹⁸

Here is another verse citing for us the content of Abraham's faith: the testimony of the Lord Jesus. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw [it] and was glad." (John 8:56)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the careful student of the Word of God needs to be attentive as he approaches the four Gospels, because he discovers that the proclamation of the work of the cross is not the primary message contained in the four gospels. This is because, in fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the Lord's ministry was two-fold: 1. Primarily to gather together those already related to him by grace, and 2. To bring to an end the opportunity for those who had been neglectful to continue to represent His kingdom. It is not until the Lord closes the door of opportunity for the Israelites, and opens that door to the Gentiles, that we see the rudimentary principles of the Gospel of grace completely developed to a people with no prior knowledge; a people who, from every nation, were to become His own special people.

¹⁸ How much time transpired between the time Abraham, according to Galatians 3:8, heard the Gospel and the time in Genesis 15:6 where it is reported that he believed the Gospel? If Genesis 15:6 is the point of Abraham's justification, then how many years did he spend cogitating upon the message he heard in 12:3? This point really drives home another issue, that is, the faith that justifies is not exercised by a spiritually indifferent person. I have often stated that we are not saved by works, but neither are we saved in a state of complacency. The unrighteous man sitting in the church pew on Sunday morning anxiously looking at his watch in anticipation of the NFL Game of the Week kickoff is probably not going to come to faith on that morning. His heart is too distracted by worldly care to allow the Gospel a hearing in the depths of his soul.

Some time ago there was a young mother who had been regularly attending our church for about two years. During this period, she had been under the teaching of grace, but I still had serious doubts concerning her salvation. Her problem was that she was struggling in her marriage and she wanted so much to make her marriage work that that desire became a distraction to her hearing the Word. I still recall the glares I got from certain members of my congregation when I told them the problem with this woman was that she was not saved. Well, this woman finally went through a divorce, accepted that her marriage was over, and read a book on the Gospel that I had once given her - and then was truly saved. She called me one evening; all excited (as most newly saved people are), and related how she had read that book and grace finally made sense. This lady had not previously believed because the driving concern of her life had not been to have a relationship with God, but to have a good marriage. Her all-consuming desire to save her marriage was actually distracting her from hearing with her heart the message of grace.

The point is this: like Abraham, people who are saved are people who come to grips with some core issues concerning themselves and God (such as their own depravity in light of God's Holiness and a certain condemnation because of it). It is those core truths that leave the soul unsettled until such a person comes to faith in God's perfect provision for their sin.

