
God's Plans and Ours

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 11 January 2026

Isaiah 42:1-9 • Matthew 3:13-17



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We talked last week about God's plans, how carefully they are prepared and executed. God's plan to bring us the promise of salvation, through the birth, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ, is well-laid and in progress from the beginning of time, or before, as we understand time. God's time, we are often told, is the best time; God's preparation is greater than any human preparation. We see this in the Gospel this morning, as Jesus arrives at the river Jordan to be baptised by John.

God's time is the best time, and well-begun is half-done, as they also say. The incarnate Jesus, Jesus as a man, is not just thrown into the world to do a job. The ground is prepared, the plans are laid, and every step taken is important. John and Jesus are both given to ordinary women to be born; they both grow up at the same time; and their work begins at the same time. John prepares the way by proclaiming the coming of Jesus, "the one whose sandals I am not fit to

carry” (Matt. 3:11). John establishes his role of baptising with those who come to him at the river, so that when Jesus appears, he too asks for baptism, and doing so makes him like all those others on the river bank — he is one of them. Although John protests briefly, it must be done, in order “to fulfil all righteousness” (3:15). “Fulfilling righteousness” means obeying God, just as much for us as it is for Jesus. And God and the Holy Spirit immediately signal their approval.

In a few short scenes in the first chapters of his Gospel, Matthew sets out all the prerequisites for success for Jesus’ mission. His miraculous birth, his escape from Herod’s murderous jealousy, and his baptism from John all set him up to succeed. All these things are vitally important in God’s plan; any one of these steps left out or only half-done might have caused the plan to fail.

I am reminded of my school career. In the US, the school year runs roughly from mid-September to mid-June, and the kids have the three summer months off. If you’re born in the early or middle part of the year, you start school in September at age five, in kindergarten, and go on the following year to first grade. But if you don’t turn five until after September, then you have to wait until the next September. The school authorities of course want the children to be roughly the same age when they start school. I was born in December, so I couldn’t start with all the other kids who had already turned five in 1965. I would have to wait for September 1966.

But my parents felt that although I was up to ten months or so younger than the other kids, I was ready to start school. They had already been teaching me to read, starting with my favourite book, *The Wild and Woolly Animal Book* — from which I learned quite early how to spell “elephant.” (I was quite proud of that.) So they discovered that if they enrolled me in a private kindergarten, not a public state-run one, that I would then be able to join the other kids in first grade the following year. And so that is what happened. Throughout my public schooling, I was thus almost always the youngest in my class, by half a year on average. But I was able to keep up, because of the plan my parents put into action. I had the preparation I needed to make a success of my primary and secondary schooling.

Later, when I was a teenager in high school, I took all the advanced courses which my high school offered. Unfortunately, however, that particular high school didn’t offer much in that line, though I didn’t realise it at the time. When I started university, I signed up for calculus and physics and chemistry classes which I assumed I could do well in. But I hadn’t really had the proper preparation for them, and it was a bit of a rude awakening. I didn’t have the proper foundation, the proper prerequisites for those university courses, and I did

very poorly in them. I was set for failure, and though I did recover and graduate with a degree, it was in another field.

Jesus was not set for failure. His Father gave him an incredibly difficult task to do, and knew that it would take all his strength and determination and faith to complete it. You may say that God's plans cannot fail, and it is true; not only will none of God's words ever fall to the ground in vain, but not one thing will fail of all the good things your Lord God promises (Joshua 23:14). God set in motion everything that had to happen to enable Jesus to succeed in his mission here on earth. And we are the beneficiaries, for all that God did was done in love for us. And we can see only a part of God's plans, the part he chooses to reveal to us.

How do we react in the light of God's plan for us? Well, first, we give thanks. In the face of such love and such sacrificial action on the part of Jesus, the only appropriate response is gratitude. Second, we may pray that we may come to know the full meaning of God's plan for us — which is to say, that we may know God fully and intimately. Such knowledge is perhaps not given to us in this world. And third, we may recommit ourselves to following Christ in all things, so that we may take full advantage of the gift God offers us, eternal life in his presence.

A final thought: we are made in God's image. Perhaps that means that we look like God, and of course Jesus told Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). But we certainly may imitate God, in some things, at least. What would a plan look like for us to come closer to God? What steps might we take? Perhaps regular, daily Bible reading, for the Bible is God's revelation of himself. Perhaps regular daily prayer, to seek God's mind and Spirit through our minds and spirits. Perhaps seeking out opportunities to help our fellow humans, through volunteer work. And perhaps sharing with someone else what we know about God. These are steps we can take in our plan to know God more fully, and I can't see how they could help bearing fruit. Thanks be to God. Amen.