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God's plan of
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GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

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THE CHART

The accompanying chart is a graphic presentation of the history of salvation. An explanation of the meaning of the chart follows here.

It is suggested that you look at the chart first as a whole. In so doing, you will note first the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — at the top center, and then the curved line, portion of a circle, flowing out from God and indicating eternity. The horizontal line at the base of the chart, falling within the confines of the circle, indicates time and the span of the universe from the moment of its creation until its consummation at the end of time.

With the general picture in mind, then, we will consider the details in it, step by step, keeping in mind that it is a diagram of the plan of God for men. The scope of God's plan is from eternity to eternity. It is necessary for us, then, to open our minds and hearts wide to see it. Actually, our vision of God's plan comes to us through faith. At the heart of it is God himself — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — with His overwhelming love for men. For *salvation history is essentially the story of God's love for men.*

Each of the arrow lines leading out from God indicates some special aspect of His love — some special work of His for man's happiness. And all of these separate interventions on God's part in human history are not just so many isolated incidents but each has its proper place and role in the whole vast plan of God for man's salvation. From the beginning of the universe until the final coming of Christ on the last day, the whole of creation lies open to the loving glance of God. By His word and by His work He guides men and helps them to reach, if they will, the fullness of life and happiness in Him. "The plan of the Lord stands forever; the design of his heart, through all generations" (Ps. 32:11).

Beginning now at the left end of the horizontal line, we will move gradually along from point to point through the successive manifestations of God's goodness and mercy until we reach its supreme manifestation in Jesus Christ. Truly to grasp the meaning of this chart requires not merely a knowledge of the successive events indicated, but a deep realization through faith of the inner reality of God's action in each case.

In this chart the oblique lines reaching from the name of God down into the line which marks the course of the life of the human race indicate God's interventions in the affairs of men. Only a few of these divine interventions before Christ are recorded on this chart. These are the most important ones which affect the whole people and which prepare them in a special way for the coming of the Savior in the fullness of time.

As we look at the chart and consider the many and powerful ways in which God intervened in the affairs of His people for their great good, we know that every one of these works of God for His people was a proof of His love for them. Thinking on the history of Israel, we can see how each of these acts of God marked a step further in the progress of His people toward union with Him. So far, however, it has been entirely a work of preparation for the supreme mysterious work which God would accomplish for the salvation of men.

At the center of the chart, as you see, there is the symbol of Christ, the Chi-Rho. The arrow line coming down from heaven to earth represents the coming of Christ to earth, His incarnation. The script below indicates the redeeming work of Christ — His passion, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. The arrow at the right leading from earth represents His return to His Father, in His ascension. You will note, then, the strong oblique line leading down from heaven to the end of the horizontal line, indicating the final coming of Christ of the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

Immediately at the right of the arrow indicating the ascension of Christ, you will see the second arrow coming to earth from heaven. This indicates the coming of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Holy Spirit, sent to men by the Father and the Son. From the time of His coming — ten days after the ascension of Christ — He will abide with the Church to the end of time.

The many oblique lines here, from the Ascension of Christ to the end of time, indicate the continued interventions of God in the lives of redeemed men, by His word and by His saving action in the liturgy.

As you look at the chart now, note the titles given for three successive stages in salvation history: 1) "Israel's Hope for Salvation"; 2) "The Fulfillment of Israel's Hope and Infinitely More"; 3) "THE DAY OF THE LORD."

We today are living in the final times, the "Day of the Lord," a Day now almost two thousand years long and destined to endure to the end of time. At the end of time, we know, Jesus Christ will come again, this time as Judge of the living and the dead. All men will be there on this last day, not just their souls but body and soul united, for in that day the bodies of men will be resurrected. Complete and whole, each person who at his dying was in God's friendship will enter into the life of the world to come. Salvation history will then reach its fulfillment and climax.

"Human history is moving toward a final end in which the saving plan of God will reach its full accomplishment. . . The death and resurrection of Christ already

mark the beginning of the end of the world. . . The present age is the first stage. The final order of things now exists, fully in Christ Himself, but only in a hidden, incomplete way in the rest of creation. . . The second coming of Christ will bring into the open the new order that now lies hidden.” (Msgr. Charles Davis, *Liturgy and Doctrine*, pp. 113-114). On that final day the triumph of Christ will be known to all men.

SALVATION HISTORY

O my people, hear my teaching,
 give heed to the words from my lips:
I will open my mouth in a parable,
 I will recall the mystery of days past.

What we have heard and been taught,
 what our fathers have told us,
We shall not hide from their sons:
 we shall tell the generation to come
The praises of the Lord and his power,
 and the wonders that he wrought: . . .

That his commands to our fathers
 should be made known to their sons,
That the generation to come, the children to be born,
 should rise up in turn, and tell their sons:
That they should put their trust in God,
 not forgetting the great deeds of God,
 but observing his commands: . . .

Like sheep he led out his people,
 in the desert he guided them like a flock,
He led them out to safety, unafraid,
 while the sea covered up their foes:
To his holy land he brought them,
 to the mountains won by his right hand:
He drove out the heathen before them,
 and by lot awarded them their heritage,
He settled the tribes of Israel in their tents (Ps. 77).

So the inspired Hebrew psalmist exhorted his people to remember and to tell their children about the “great deeds of the Lord” in their behalf, to keep alive forever the memory of the wonderful things God wrought for them when he led them out from slavery in Egypt and brought them into a land which He gave them for their own: when he formed them into a *people*, a People which He made His own: when He gave His People a Law and a Covenant.

The people of Israel knew they were unique among nations, and that the reason for their uniqueness was precisely this: They were the Chosen People of the living God. To Him they owed everything. This was their *Credo*:

“My father was a wandering Aramean who went down to Egypt with a small household and lived there as an alien. But there he became a nation, great, strong and numerous. When the Egyptians maltreated and oppressed us, imposing hard labor upon us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our cry and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. He brought us out of Egypt with his strong right hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying power, with signs and wonders; and bringing us into this country, he gave us this land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore, I have now brought you the first fruits of the products of the soil which you, O Lord, have given me” (Deut. 26:5-10).

When the Israelites had fulfilled the precept directing them to bring the first fruits of the harvest to the priest, who would offer them to the Lord in thanksgiving, they were acknowledging that they owed to the Lord the harvest and all good things that came to them. “Then,” the word of God continued, “you and your family, together with the Levite and the aliens who live among you, shall make merry over all these good things which the Lord, your God, has given you” (Deut. 26:11).

A fact which must strongly impress a person reading God’s word in the holy Bible is that God is revealing Himself to His People not only by what He says to them but also by what He *does* for them and among them. He speaks to men by His works as well as by His word. He enters into their lives as a People, acting as their Guide and Protector and Savior. He intervenes in their affairs for their great good. They perceive the beginnings of a pattern and a plan in these divine interventions, which they expect to lead to ever greater good for them, if they, on their part, adhere to God by faith in Him and by keeping His commandments. Their God is not remote from them but enters into the very fabric of their daily lives. This was true when they were still wandering shepherd people and later when they have a land of their own, upon which they can make their living.

This intimate communication between men and God did not always exist. Scientists tell us that men have lived on earth many thousands of years: some say as many as five hundred thousand years, or even more. They tell us that the universe has existed for a vastly longer time — probably for from three to five billion years. They do not tell us how the universe began to be, however.

This question — that is, of the beginning of things — has fascinated people always, apparently, and not surprisingly. Records of primitive peoples reveal myths of one kind or other which they have made up to account for the beginning and continued existence of the universe. The work of creating the universe they ascribe to gods, as also the work of maintaining the wonderful order and rhythm which they observe in things, for example, in the regular recurring of day and night, of the seasons, of birth and death, light and darkness. For themselves, they see that

their best hope for safety will be in keeping close to these gods — gods, of course, of their own invention.

In these pagan myths, men took the initiative, imagining and establishing their gods and deciding what relations existed between them and men. Their lives, they believed, moved in ever returning cycles, forever repeating the original works of the gods bringing order out of chaos. For them there was no goal, no purpose to achieve, no meaning. There was for them no experience of such happiness as man was meant to enjoy.

To His Chosen People, however, God made known many facts about the beginning of things. God made known to them His creation of the universe and of men. He revealed to them the original state of friendship with Him to which He had raised man, and they learned of man's deliberate forfeiting of this divine friendship.

However long ago it may have been since men first lived on earth, this we know: the first man and woman came directly from the creating hand of God. This is true whether or not the human body may have evolved from lower animal life. For, in any case, the human souls of Adam and Eve, as the soul of every human being, were created directly by God.

Made to the image of God, with a share in His dominion over creation, man was the master over the things of earth. By his nature man was very great. But beyond his nature, man received from God a supernatural gift which lifted him up to a sharing in the very life of God. This gift we call *sanctifying grace*. By it men enjoyed the friendship of God. The life of our first parents, Adam and Eve, was a very happy one.

From them to whom He had given such proofs of His love, God asked a response of love. When the test came, however, they refused obedience to God's command. By the disobedience of Adam, the head of the human race, the whole race of men fell from God's friendship. The consequences of Adam's sin for Adam and Eve and for all men were grievous indeed. Greatest among these was man's alienation from God. Without sanctifying grace, man was estranged from God. Men no longer possessed other special gifts which God had given them, the preternatural gifts. Men experienced now within themselves a strong inclination to evil. Sufferings of many kinds came to men because of Adam's sin.

But God willed to give to men a second chance. He had a wonderful plan for man's salvation.

Thousands of years, hundreds of thousands of years passed. During this time, as we learn from the first eleven chapters of Genesis, men learned from sad experience the evil that sin brought into their lives. God had promised salvation for men. When would He begin His saving work among us?

GOD'S CALL OF ABRAHAM

The first crisis, or turning point, in the unhappy lives of men came a little less than four thousand years ago — about 1850 B.C. This turning point came not as a result of anything men had done, not on man's initiative at all, in fact. It was a direct intervening in human history by God Himself. It was the first of a series of divine interventions in human affairs, guiding men toward the realization of God's plan for them. The story of these wonderful works of God among men is the story of man's salvation. It continues as long as the world lasts.

This wonderful event which was to change the whole direction of human history is recorded in Genesis. From this account we learn that God had spoken to a man. This man, named Abram, had lived in Ur of Chaldea, whence he had journeyed north with other seminomads to a place called Haran. "The LORD said to Abram: Leave your country, your kinsfolk, and your father's house, for the land which I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). God promised Abram that he would give him a people, that He would give this people a land of their own, and that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed. Abraham responded to God's word with faith and obedience. He left his country and his kinsfolk and his father's house and went into the land to which the Lord directed him. A new era in human history has begun.

MOSES: THE EXODUS, GOD'S COVENANT WITH HIS PEOPLE

We know of the tender care which God took of His people from the time of His call of Abraham to His call of Moses to be the leader of His people. For over four centuries God watched over His people. In Egypt they prospered and grew strong until Pharaoh began to fear they were too strong and proceeded to persecute them and enslave them. To lead His people, Israel, out of slavery, in Egypt, God raised up among them a great leader, Moses.

After their journeying forth from Egypt, the Israelites came to camp in the desert of Sinai. There God spoke to Moses. "Tell the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4-6). In His great mercy God made a covenant with His people, Israel, and He gave to them through Moses the commandments of the law which they were to observe. These are the Ten Commandments.

The Exodus and God's covenant with His people, Israel, mark a very important phase of salvation history. By these deeds of His mercy God let His people know from experience how great and good a thing it was to live in His friendship. The salvation which the Exodus brought them was indeed only a temporal, material one. It was, however, a type of the great work of salvation which God would accom-

plish for all men. In it God had revealed Himself to men as a Savior. God's covenant with Israel will one day be succeeded by a new and more perfect Covenant binding a New People to God in a far closer union than that which Israel enjoyed.

DAVID: GOD'S PROMISE TO HIM (ca. 1000 B.C.)

Hundreds of years passed during which time God continued to watch over His people. When they wished to have a king, God granted their request. Their first king was Saul. After him came David, "a man after God's own heart." His kingdom was to be rich in its significance not only for David but for all mankind. David had wanted to build a temple for the Lord but God told him through His prophet Nathan that he was not to build the house for God. Later his son Solomon would do so. But God said that He would build a house for David. Of a son of David, God said: "He shall build a house to my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Kings 7:13). A son of David will rule in the kingdom of God forever. This oracle of Nathan is the basis of the Messianic hope in the Old Testament.

THE PROPHETS

To teach His people and guide them in the keeping of His Law, God raised up men among them whom He called to be His prophets. Through His prophets God spoke to Israel. Through His prophets God warned Israel, exhorted His people and encouraged them, and He held out to them always the hope of their redemption. The life of Israel was one of hoping and waiting, waiting and hoping for the coming of God's Kingdom. They were waiting for the coming of the promised Son of David. They were waiting for the coming of the prophet-like-Moses. They were waiting for the coming of the Son of Man. As is evident, their Messianic hope in the Old Testament period had many aspects.

Through the prophets whom God sent to them, this hope was kept alive even during the years of their captivity in Babylonia. "Thus says the Lord God: When I gather the house of Israel from the peoples among whom they are scattered, then will I manifest my holiness through them in the sight of the nations. Then they shall live on their land which I gave to my servant Jacob; they shall live on it in security, building houses and planting vineyards" (Ezech. 28:25-26).

Moreover, the dimensions of their hope were enlarged. "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Juda. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant, and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:31-33).

Along with these consoling prophecies of joy and fulfillment to come, there was word of a mysterious figure, a “Servant of the LORD.” Preacher of the true faith, he would lead not only Israel, but Gentiles as well, to God. This he would accomplish, however, through great suffering and sorrow. In this figure of the “Suffering Servant,” the Church later on would see an announcing of the way in which man’s redemption would be accomplished — through the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

“Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was procurator of Judea, and Herod tetrarch of Galilee, . . . the word of God came to John the son of Zachary in the desert. And he went into all the region about the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as it is written in the book of the words of Isaias the prophet, “the voice of one crying in the desert, make ready the way of the Lord, make straight His paths. . . . And all mankind shall see the salvation of God’ ” (Luke 3:1-6).

“Now as the people were in expectation, and all were wondering in their hearts about John, whether perhaps he might be the Christ, John addressed them, saying to all, ‘I indeed baptize you with water. But one mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ ” (Luke 3:15-16).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AT HAND

Almost two thousand years had passed since that momentous day when God spoke to Abraham and gave his promises which when fulfilled would affect the whole human race, bringing blessings to all the nations of the world. Of Abraham’s descendants a people had been formed which God chose for His own. He had given this people a land of their own and watched over them. Through His prophets He had kept alive among them hope for the coming of His Kingdom. He had taught them and guided them to know and serve Him, the one true God. When would this hope of Israel be fulfilled? When would they see among them the prophet-like-Moses for whose coming they hoped? When, the Son of David who would reign over them in an everlasting kingdom? When, the Son of Man of whom the prophet Daniel spoke? When would the promised One, the Christ, come?

With John the Baptist, the period of preparation comes to its close. “The Kingdom of God,” he proclaims, “is at hand.”

JESUS CHRIST, SON OF GOD AND SAVIOR

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that those who believe in him may not perish, but may have life everlasting. For God did not send

his Son into the world in order to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16-17).

The coming of the Son of God into the world and His accomplishment of man's redemption constitute the climax of human history. In the redeeming action of Christ, God's plan for man's redemption is fulfilled. Jesus Christ, the new Adam, by His obedience to the will of His Father atones for man's sin and restores men once more to the friendship of God. The gates of heaven closed to men for hundreds of thousands of years open wide again. Nothing in human history compares remotely in importance with the saving action of Christ, who by His passion and death, His resurrection and ascension into heaven, opened once more to men the way to unending happiness. The redeeming work of Christ is significant not only for Catholics, but for every man, woman, and child who has ever lived or ever will live on the face of the earth.

"From the original creation to future glory, the becoming of the universe is planned once for all, commanded entirely by Christ and the unique economy of salvation." (D. Dubarle, O.P., "The Octave of Creation," *Theology Library*, Vol. II, p. 288). At the center and peak of human history stands Christ, the God-man, our Lord and Redeemer. From the beginning of the universe, all points to Him. When He came among men, and suffered and died for men, and then rose triumphant from the grave, He changed the course of human history. Once more, in Him, the path of men is redirected toward God. There is now for men a way to God and this way is Christ Himself.

So important for men is Christ's saving action — His passion, death and resurrection and ascension — that not a man, woman or child who ever lived or ever will live can know the fullness of life and happiness with God except through union with Christ in His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension. But how will it be possible for men of other times and other places to have part in Christ's redeeming work?

CHRIST'S REDEEMING WORK TO THE END OF TIME

No one knew better than Christ the need of men for Him. A short time before He died, He set His whole redeeming work in a sacrament — the sacrament of the Eucharist. A sacrament, as we know is a sign which actually brings about the thing that it signifies. And the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Mass, signifies and accomplishes sacramentally the very passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. From the beginning of the Church to the end of time, across the world, the redeeming work of Christ is renewed day after day, hour after hour, for the salvation of the men of that day.

"As a paschal meal the Eucharist . . . puts man in contact with reality, with Christ's historical resurrection from death; it enables man to emerge with Christ from selfish containment to a more expansive life, a life radiantly divine, a life that endures." (Geoffrey Wood, S.A., *The Bible Today* (March, 1963), p. 317). "The Old

Testament covenant meal was an imperfect reality. It symbolized, but did not effect, the union between the two parties to the covenant. Even the covenant between God and Israel was an imperfect reality inasmuch as it was conditioned. . . . The new and perfect covenant . . . ratified by Jesus Christ, was a lasting covenant. . . . The Eucharist, which is the covenant meal of this new reality both symbolizes and effects the increase of unity between the Christian and God and between Christian and Christian.” (William E. Lynch, C.M., *Ibid.*, p. 320).

Salvation history was not finished with the ascension of Christ. It continues to the end of the world, to include all the generations of men. For God loves all men and sent His only-begotten Son into the world to die for the salvation of all men. “The plan of the Lord stands forever; the design of his heart, through all generations” (Ps. 32:11).

How does Christ carry on His saving work in the world today? In His Church.

THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT / THE CHURCH, BODY OF CHRIST

After His ascension into heaven, Christ with the Father sent the Holy Spirit upon His apostles and disciples to unite them with Him and with one another in Him. This body of men united with Christ and with one another in Him is the Church. “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? . . . holy is this temple of God and this temple you are” (I Cor. 3:16-17).

In His Church, the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, Christ lives to the end of time and carries on His redeeming action for generation after generation through His sacraments. Supremely, of course, in the sacrament of His sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Mass.

The sacraments are *signs* of God’s saving action. Being sacraments, they are *effective signs*, that is, they bring about what they signify. Their power is not, however, their own. They are the channels through which Christ’s saving action, His divine power of healing, reaches us. “The sacraments are not things, but rather personal living encounters with the glorified Jesus, and in Him, with the living God.” (Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P.).

Our response to Christ’s initiative in our sacramental encounter with Him must be that of *faith*. This is what God asks of us — the response of a living dynamic *faith* which brings us to open our lives to His healing action and to commit ourselves completely to Him. This commitment to Christ brings our whole life with all its day-to-day affairs into its own true place in God’s plan for man’s salvation.

In the Church men are living in constant communication with God. The tragedy of Christians is not to know their greatness, not to be conscious of the great dignity to which they have been called in Baptism, not to realize that here and now, in their daily lives, they are already living, by faith, in the final day of the world, in the time that is truly called **THE DAY OF THE LORD**.

From the time of our Baptism we have been living in the “new order that now lies hidden.” We are sharing now in the risen life of Christ, in His triumph over sin and death. “As Christians we already share the resurrection of Christ, but that does not mean that we shall not die; it means that we shall conquer death by rising again from the dead. There is planted in us the seed of resurrection . . . and when the time comes our bodies will rise from the tomb. Then our share in Christ’s resurrection will be complete, and death will be no more.” (Msgr. Charles Davis, *Liturgy and Doctrine*, p. 118).

THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME

What will life be like in the world to come, in the final day of a “new heaven and a new earth”? (Apoc. 21:1). “This new heaven and new earth signify the renewal and glorification of our universe, as other texts make clear. Thus the second coming of Christ is called the ‘day of reestablishing all things,’ ‘the time when all is restored anew’ (Acts 3:21).” (Hasseveldt, R., *The Christian Meaning of Hope*, pp. 23-24).

“This world is not just a temporary companion for the journey through this life, but a companion with whom we shall join forces again and forever, just as we shall with our bodies. . . . Our task on earth is to take our personal share in an immense work, both divine and human, which began with the Creation and which will be complete only with the second coming of Christ.” (*Op. cit.*, pp. 38-39).

“We have made of the end of the world a thing of terror, conjuring up nothing but catastrophe. We must see in it also, indeed above all, the coming of Christ in His glory for the final judgment, the completion of the history of mankind, to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth.” (Yves de Montcheuil).

The condition of entering into the life of eternal happiness in the world to come, Christ has made known to us: it is that we love God and love our neighbor. To enable us to do this, Christ has sent into our hearts His own Spirit, the Spirit of Love. The test of our loving, Christ also has made known to us: “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. But he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (John 14:21). “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). “In the evening of life,” said St. John of the Cross, “we shall all be judged on love.”

So salvation history begins with the creation of the universe and continues to the end of time. In this saving work of Christ we are all involved, each in his own time. It is always TODAY in the life of the Church. We, now of TODAY, need to make our strong whole-hearted response to God’s initiative in faith and in love.

Let us put on the breastplate of faith and charity,
and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

For God has not destined us unto wrath,
but to gain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who died for us in order that . . . we should live
together with him.

And may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely,
and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved sound,
blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who called you is faithful and will do this.

(I Thess. 5:8-10, 23-24).

