God's Better Plan

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, October 27, 2024
PASSAGES	John 6; Matthew 20; Isaiah 53; Matthew 27
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:00:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

When we do not know what God is doing, we can still trust that he is doing something better than what we asked for. Again and again he refuses the good plan in order to grant the deeper desire underneath it — and the cross is the place where that pattern is proved, because there he let the worst plan ever made succeed and turned it into his own victory.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- God sometimes says no to a genuinely good prayer because saying yes would cost you the thing you were really praying for.
- The Jewish expectation of a conquering king was not stupidity. It was built out of Scripture, and the verses are still there.
- Hindsight is cheap. We read Isaiah 53 knowing the ending and congratulate ourselves for seeing what nobody could see going forward.
- What the people wanted was freedom from Rome. What Jesus came to break was slavery to sin — and had he given them the first without the second, the kingdom would still have been full of sinners.
- Satan's plan at the cross worked exactly as he intended, and it was the mechanism of his defeat. God takes our garbage plans and turns them toward his glory.
- No single person knows how to build a skyscraper. We are stacking blocks; God designed the blocks. That gap is a reason for peace, not anxiety.

▶ 0:55:24

The fourth Sunday of the month is normally the Sunday Wes Neely spends down the hall with the middle schoolers. Matt was away, so Wes kept a foot in both rooms: he preached in the service, and partway through he had three of his students walked in to read the verses they had found for him. He also turned thirty that week, and the congregation sang before he could stop them.

One takeaway, three overruled plans

▶ 1:00:11

Wes gave the room one sentence to carry out the door: when we do not know what God's plan is, we can still have trust and faith in that plan. Then three cases — one from church history, one from first-century Judea, one from the cross — where somebody had a plan, God changed its direction entirely, and the change was mercy. His framing was wry about our part in it: we are often disappointed that the Almighty creator of everything has the audacity to alter the plans we made for our own lives.

1. A mother left standing on the dock

▶ 1:01:11

Augustine is Wes's favorite of the saints, and the story that started this whole message is the one Augustine tells about his mother. She was a devout Christian with one mission in her life: that her son would know Christ. She followed him from posting to posting, prayed for him constantly, pleaded with him over meals for years. Then a good job teaching rhetoric opened up in Rome, and she could not leave Carthage. She begged him not to go, weeping — if he sailed, she would not be able to guide him or teach him anymore.

He boarded a ship at night without telling her. She woke, went down to the dock hoping to catch him or call him back from the deck, and he was long gone.

▶ 1:05:16

Wes read Augustine's own account of that morning: “She remained to pray and weep. And what was it, Lord, that she was asking of you in such a flood of tears — that you would not allow me to sail? But you, taking your own secret counsel and noting the real point of her desire, did not grant her what she was asking for, in order that you would later grant her the thing she had always been asking for.” She filled God's ears with complaints and groans, which he disregarded — “though at the very same time you were using my longings as a means to bring me to the fulfillment of all longing.”

In Rome, Augustine met Ambrose of Milan, and Ambrose is who brought him to Christ. "The real point of her desire," Wes said, "was for him to come to Christ. And in order to grant that desire, God had to say no to her prayer right then and there." Most of us have prayed something we were sure was good and heard nothing back. She did too.

2. A Messiah they could describe from Scripture

▶ 1:07:52

We enjoy shaking our heads at the people who missed him. Wes thinks most of us, standing where they stood, would have missed him the same way. After the loaves and fish:

> "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, 'This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."
>
> JOHN 6:14–15 ↗

The credentials checked out; the miracle had just happened in front of them. Make him king, and he throws out the Romans and establishes the kingdom they were promised. Closer in, the same assumption sat inside the circle of disciples:

> "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.'"
>
> MATTHEW 20:20–21 ↗

▶ 1:09:22

She had been with him the whole way; her sons had earned their places. When you kick out the Romans, remember them. And at the other end of the story, when Herod heard from the wise men that a king had been born, he did not conclude that this was a metaphorical king who would reign in heaven and save the world from sin — he concluded there was a rival in Israel and sent men to kill him (Matthew 2:1–3). Nobody in the account, friend or enemy, had the plan right.

3. Isaiah 53, and how cheap hindsight is

▶ 1:15:31

This is the passage we reach for when we want to ask how they could possibly have missed it.

> "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities… He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter… And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence… Yet it was the will of the **Lord** to crush him."
>
> ISAIAH 53:4–10 ↗

▶ 1:17:50

"In hindsight it's pretty easy," Wes said, "so let's not think too much of ourselves." He noted a piece of the argument's history worth keeping. Before about 1900 the passage read so much like Christ that critics assumed Christians had written it in later. Then the Dead Sea Scrolls surfaced, and the text was demonstrably centuries older than Jesus. The claim promptly reversed itself — the Christians must have written the story to match the text. The goalposts moved; the prophecy did not.

4. What the middle schoolers brought in

▶ 1:19:50

All semester the middle school class has been reading the Old Testament looking for Christ in it. That morning Wes gave them chapters and one assignment — find the verses that would make an expectation of a conquering king reasonable — and then had them read out what they found. He had not chosen the verses for them.

▶ 1:21:26

Evelyn read Isaiah 9:6 — "and the government shall be upon his shoulder" — and Wes had her read that clause again. Government on his shoulder does not sound like a man going quietly to a cross. Abigail's group had Micah 5:9: "Your hand shall be lifted up over your adversaries, and all your enemies shall be cut off." Felicity read Jeremiah 30:8, where God breaks the yoke from off their neck and foreigners no longer enslave them.

Their expectation was built out of holy Scripture, and it still was not the plan — because God's answer came in two parts, and the freedom he came to give first was not the one they would have chosen. Rome was the intolerable thing. Sin was the fatal one. Wes ran the thought experiment: suppose Jesus had simply granted the request, skipped the cross, and set up the kingdom. It would have been a kingdom of the same fallen people, with the actual problem still inside it.

5. The plan Satan thought he was winning

▶ 1:24:58

Almost nobody who knew Jesus was at the cross. They scattered, Wes suggested, because what they were watching read as failure — abort the plan, it's over, this is the devil winning. And on the other side of it, you have to imagine Satan looking at the Son of God nailed to a piece of wood with something like glee: all that work stirring the hearts of men, and here is God himself, killable.

> "Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'"
>
> MATTHEW 27:25–31 ↗

▶ 1:27:06

Wes asked the room to read it as if the ending were not known yet — because if you were standing there with a first-century expectation of the Messiah, this is another crazy prophet whose rebellion has collapsed. "God takes that plan," he said. "Okay, fine, Satan, you can kill me. That's exactly what I wanted you to do." The plan succeeded and was, in succeeding, the defeat of the one who made it.

6. Skyscrapers and a stack of blocks

▶ 1:32:53

He closed with a job site. Put fifteen contractors on one building and every one of them can tell you what the others did wrong and how it made his own work harder. That anger assumes the project revolves around you. On a good site the general contractor holds a plan that was never about giving you an easy day.

▶ 1:36:32

Then he scaled it. Driving past the towers going up downtown, he wondered whether any one human being — given infinite time, tools, and materials — actually knows how to build a skyscraper from the ground up. Almost none do. Each one knows his trade, and the whole is a magnitude of plans and causes that no single person holds. If you did know someone who held all of it, you would trust them.

And a skyscraper, to God, is Silas stacking blocks into a little tower: genuinely delightful, and not what you would call an engineering feat. We build with materials he designed. "Now try designing the building blocks yourself." For every tower we have raised, he made planets and stars and galaxies. If

anyone can take all the craziness of a life and form it into something ultimately good, it is him — which is the whole argument for less stress about how things turn out. He turned the murder of his own Son into the definitive victory. Wes's last word was that we do not need to worry about the plan; we need to worry about our response to it.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- John 6:14–15
- Matthew 20:20–21
- Matthew 2:1–3
- Isaiah 53:4–10
- Isaiah 9:6
- Micah 5:9
- Jeremiah 30:8
- Matthew 27:25–31

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely leads Hope Chapel's middle school ministry, going out with the students on the second and fourth Sundays of the month; this semester the class has been reading the Old Testament looking for pictures of Christ. He preached this message on a fourth Sunday in Matt's absence, and brought three of his students into the service to read the verses they had found. He turned thirty the week he gave it. Augustine is his favorite of the saints.

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What good thing have you asked God for and not received? Looking back, can you name what he may have been protecting or preparing underneath the request?
2. Augustine's mother wanted her son near her so she could bring him to Christ. Where might your method of getting a good outcome be the thing God is quietly refusing?
3. The verses the middle schoolers read really do describe a conquering king. How do you hold a passage whose plain sense points somewhere other than where God took it?
4. Rome was the unbearable problem; sin was the fatal one. What is the "Rome" you are asking God to remove right now, and what might be the deeper thing he is after?
5. If God turned the killing of his own Son into his victory, what would change in how you respond this week to the plan of yours that is currently falling apart?

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyD9C_8yKBc&t=0s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.