

The Bible's Meta-Story, Redux

Almost all preaching and teaching in churches focuses on a passage here or there in Scripture. The problem with this is, we lose sight of the great over-riding story to which all the passages contribute so that all Scripture coheres. Unless we grasp the big picture, we fail to understand fully each contributing passage. Furthermore, it's only by understanding the Bible's big picture that we can construct in our mind a worldview that enables us to live biblically. So although we've already looked at the grand meta-narrative of Scripture in previous Sunday School lessons, we need to do it again.

As the Book of Revelation narrates, at the end of time God will throw Satan into a fiery hell for an eternity of punishment. The question immediately emerges: Why didn't God do that before He even created time, when Satan at first rebelled against God? Why did God allow Satan to bring evil into existence and cause thousands and thousands of years of sorrow and hurt for God's creatures? The answer isn't revealed in Scripture, but enough clues are there so that, if we piece them together, a possible answer emerges. Let's reflect on this, because it deeply affects how we think and live today.

I imagine the following conversation took place in heaven, before God created:

Satan: "You want me to submit to You? Why should I? What do You know of obedience, which is what You're asking of me? What do You know of loyalty to You, which is what You're demanding of me? Or of servanthood? And why should I sacrifice myself and my desires for You? What do You know of self-sacrifice? It would be unjust of You to demand these of me when You Yourself know nothing of them."

God: "Trust Me. I know what I'm doing."

Satan: "Trust You? Trusting You, being humbly dependent on You, is weakness! What do You know of weakness? You are willful and powerful. You are sovereign. All you do is rule. Well I can be like that. I can rule too."

God: "I warn you, you are being rebellious. You'd be wise to fear Me."

Satan: "I am beautiful, intelligent and powerful. I am like You. How am I in rebellion?"

God would not and could not forcefully dispose of this taunting, contemptuous, rebellious creature because that would be an exercise of will and strength, which is exactly what Satan's ideal is. To exercise His sovereignty and throw Satan into hell at that point would be doing exactly what Satan, the epitome and embodiment of wickedness, would himself do. To do that would not be just. And God is infinitely just as well as infinitely good. So in perfect wisdom, God put into place an alternate way of dealing with Satan and all evil, a way that upholds His justice, a way that glorifies Him.

God: "Satan, I will allow you some latitude to exert your willfulness. But you are still My servant and you must serve Me. And I will show you my character. You will know Me. And in the end you will serve Me by glorifying Me, for then you will be humbled, and you will be justly punished. Your rebelliousness is no threat to My holiness."

So God created, and that's where Genesis One begins. God created time and a physical place, and in it he put unique, embodied persons, people with a will that could be freely exercised (though within limits) and with the capacity to know God, to love Him, and to want to be like Him. The will to be like Him would not only express love for God but would glorify God as well. More importantly, the will to love God and be like Him would show up Satan for the evil being that he was. That's because although these human creatures would not have the beauty, intelligence, or powers that Satan had, they would nevertheless honor God and love Him and serve Him *for who He is*, which is what proud Satan would not do.

In this world that God made, there are privileges and responsibilities. The privileges include the blessings of life, to bear the image of God, to rule over creation in God's place, and the superlative privilege of access to God Himself. Man's main responsibility is obedience to God. So God has built into every human as well as having placed in His creation a certain awareness of Himself; we all have an innate consciousness of His existence. He's also explicitly revealed certain instructions how we're to live as guests in His house. Thus for example, as God is righteous, righteousness is demanded of us. So necessarily there are tests; we're all, from that first couple in the Garden to everyone all thru history to all that are alive in the world today, being tested for how we respond to God's revelation of Himself and the expectation of righteousness. And in those tests, what God looks for are the very qualities that Satan challenged: trust in God,

obedience to His will, selflessness and love toward others, service to others on God's behalf and to fulfill His purposes, loyalty to God and humility before Him.

But because of sin, an exceedingly powerful force that enslaves every human, our will is incapable of responding to God. Worse, because of sin, we're all, everyone, in the firm grip of Satan to fulfill his evil desires and to suffer his ultimate punishment. Satan's control of us and the influences of his wicked hosts makes it impossible for us to respond to God. Satan rebelled against God, he seized dominion of God's created world, and his rebellion has spread to all his human vassals. So Satan's ideals of lies, violence, greed, hatred, and lust, and his character traits of selfishness, pride, and contempt for God define the lives of all mankind, a co-opted race unconsciously in thrall to rebellious Satan. Even the people specifically called to be light failed. Their indwelling sin nature and the ceaseless oppression by Satanic hosts prevented them from fulfilling the purpose for which they were called, viz, to war against the Dark Kingdom to save some.

Now, all thru the Bible's history there have been a few godly individuals, lights that shone in an otherwise morally exceedingly dark world. Thus we read in scripture of Abel and Seth, Enoch and Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, Joshua, Caleb, Boaz, David, Elijah, and Daniel, and Sarah and Rebecca, Rahab, Hannah, and Ruth and a few others. The Bible narrates the stories of these godly persons to remind us of God's ultimate purposes on earth. But except for these, the vast multitude of humanity has lived, suffered and died in total darkness. The human situation, it seems, is desperate and tragic. Since even before Creation, a great, cosmic spiritual war has been going on: the terrible forces of Darkness against God's host of loyal created beings, his loyal angels and the few individuals who knew God and lived out His righteousness, the side of Light. But Satan appears to have had the victory in this war.

Except that he didn't. The most important event in all time and space, the greatest moment in all history, is the in-breaking of God Himself into His own created but very dark world. And that changed everything.

Taking upon himself human nature, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Godhead, stepped into the physical world He had created. He lived righteously, in humble dependence on the Father, faithfully obeying the will of the Father even to the extent of giving Himself over to be flogged and put to an agonizing death. He was fully submitted to the will of God the Father. He came as a Servant, serving humanity with love and blessing, and serving God by carrying out His mission of rescue. He came because of love, a transcendent kind of love that sacrifices oneself in order to deliver people from a horrible condition and an even worse destiny even though those people really deserved only condemnation. And He went voluntarily to His death, a sacrificial, atoning death, in weakness trusting the Father to restore Him to life and to vindicate His humiliation and His mission.

What the Son did in the Person of Jesus was to make possible the forgiveness of sin – all human sin – as well as deliverance from the power of sin, and deliverance even from the powerful, iron-like grip of Satan. Rising from the dead, He has eternal, resurrection life to impart to those who follow Him and empowerment to live righteously, as God demanded of His human creatures. But of exceeding importance to our discussion here, He did something else that we too easily miss: He revealed the nature of God in a way that words cannot do.

I can claim to be a kind person. But kindness is only an abstract concept unless and until I actually do something that is kind. Likewise, love is only love when it is expressed. "Love is as love does." God's true character had to be expressed, and it was fully and beautifully expressed in the incarnate life of the Son. Because of Jesus' perfect Person, His life, death and resurrection on full display for all – including Satan! – to see, God's nature is gloriously revealed. And so Satan was shown to be a rebel, justly deserving of eternal punishment. The loyal, humble, obedient life and self-sacrificing work of the incarnate Servant, the Son, defeated that proud, rebellious, self-seeking servant, Satan, as well as the host of demons who followed him in contempt of God. See Hebrews 2:14, Colossians 2:15, 1 John 3:8, and John 12:31. God's infinite love, the very essence of His goodness, having been fully expressed at the cross of Christ, defeated all the evil in the cosmos.

That is my reading of the Bible's great story. Notice what's at issue in this: What's God like, and do His servants need to be like Him? Our story therefore has at least two important implications, so let's think about the *meaning* of this story.

1. Every created being, whether supernatural or human, exists to serve God. The loyal angels serve God faithfully. Satan did not want to serve God (though he must); he wanted to serve himself. The demonic angels chose to serve Satan.

Human have two choices, either serve self, which is the same as serving Satan, or serve God as God has revealed. Because Satan initiated a rebellion in the heavens against God, we on earth are ineluctably and necessarily involved.

In this unique era between Advents called the church age, Satan is still on the loose. He's still the wicked tyrannical ruler of this world, holding the great mass of humanity in his iron grip. We, the followers of Jesus, are to take up and continue the Servant's mission of delivering people from Satan's wicked kingdom. Jesus was the first Servant, but all believers in Christ are God's servants. We're soldiers of Light, necessarily at war with the powers of darkness. It's a responsibility of salvation. Everyone who is *in Christ* is on mission, like it or not. We're tasked with reaching out with the knowledge of God in the Gospel to find those elect persons who, responding in faith, will transfer from darkness to light; we're here to rescue from eternal condemnation the ones that God has ordained to eternal life. There's cosmic warfare going on, and we're ineluctably involved. There are no spectators, and no by-standers in this war. We're either on one side or the other, serving God and spreading Light, or serving a defeated rebel keeping the darkness thick.

Satan already has been defeated, but that defeat has not yet been realized. The warfare goes on, and will continue until Christ returns. We need to be fully engaged in this warfare to fulfill our salvation's purpose. We have a story to tell. The Bible is a story of exalted love, it's a story that has the power to transform a life and make it fit for eternity. It's a story that can either bless or judge, depending on how it's received, because it's the story of our great Creator God. It's a story that is true and compelling. It's a story we should, with great joy, be sharing with others.

2. Satan's problem was, He didn't know what God is like. If he did, his rebellion would have been stark and odious from the outset; and when God's character was revealed in the Person and work of Christ Jesus, Satan's rebellion became overt, and it was judged. So it is with us. We were created to be like God. That's the inescapable creation imperative. One of the reasons Christ came is to fully reveal God so that we can be like Him. We have the New Testament Scriptures before us, so we can know what God is like. So the onus is clearly on us to be like Him. Because otherwise, we're like Satan, rebellious. We either express godliness, or we express Satan's character; no one is "neutral."

Repeatedly the Bible commands believers to be like God. To be Christ-like, to be a follower of Christ, is to be like God. To know Christ is to know God, and that is to know the most beautiful, the most awesome, the most glorious Being there is. If we know Him, we will love Him, and to love Him should be to want to be like Him. We're commanded in the Scriptures to be holy. And to be righteous. And obedient. And faithful, loving, selfless, trusting, and humbly submitted to His will. We're to go thru life expressing Christ's perfect Person. If we're in Christ, filled with the Spirit, we will do that. The goal of salvation is our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Our imitation of Christ's character glorifies God.

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The story of Israel in the Old Testament reveals God's expectations were two-fold: Israelites were to be personally pure, and they were to be on mission. They were to live their lives purposefully, according to God's revealed will. It's no different for us in this New Testament era. We're to be like God, pure and perfect, and we're to be on mission. Anything else is not merely disobedience. It's rebellion. We need to pay the greatest heed to Scripture and not remain oblivious to our responsibilities. Because God holds us accountable.

Satan doesn't believe he's been defeated; evil has so distorted his thinking. He's still a formidable foe. He seeks our destruction, and according to 1 Peter, we should presume that he's capable of doing that. We therefore need to exercise our utmost diligence in knowing and obeying God's Word. There's no place in Christianity for smugness. This thought, so prevalent in our churches, is whispered to us by demons: "You're saved and on your way to heaven, so you can live your life as you please." There are chapters and more chapters and yet more chapters in the New Testament on how we're to live. We're instructed to "put on the new man." and to "let the mind of Christ be in you." These don't automatically come, they're *for us to do*. Paul commands us, "train yourself to be godly." We're not obedient unless we *are* obedient.

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Everyone lives his or her life according to a story. Stories shape our lives. That's why we need to keep the Bible's story in mind all the time. It's possible to know theology, be pious, and have much devotion to God, yet fail to fulfill God's purposes for our life. If we don't know the Bible's grand meta-narrative and its profound meaning for us, we will by default shape our lives according to the secular, pagan stories that swirl around us, and so fail to glorify God.

Dear reader, I beseech you: Make your life count for Christ.