

The Purpose of Creation, of Salvation

- *"And God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness'" (Genesis 1:3-4).*
- *"And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17).*
- *"Joseph said to them . . . 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good'" (Genesis 50:20).*
- *"'I set before you today life and good, death and evil. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments . . . then you will live. . . Now choose life . . . for the LORD is your life'" (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).*
- *"'Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. . . but if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD . . . And the people said to Joshua, 'We will serve the LORD our God and obey him'" (Joshua 24:14-15, 24).*
- *"This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (John 3:19-21).*
- *"God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).*

One of the most striking (yet always missed) characteristics of Christ Jesus, so evident in the Gospel narratives, is His purposefulness. In the complexity of Christianity we easily lose sight of the fact that God has purposes for His creation, indeed for saving us. Billions of years and evolution are false for this very reason: God created this cosmos for deliberate purpose(s). And we can surmise what they are by reflecting on Scripture. One of the most evident is to defeat evil so that God's goodness is demonstrated and glorified. Let's discuss this.

God is good. If there's one characteristic that emerges everywhere from Scripture, it's the goodness of God. It is evident right there on the opening pages of the Bible, for a "very good" creation would come only from the hand of a good God. But we need to ask, What does it *mean* that God is good? I can define good: Good seeks the benefit or well-being of others; it meets the needs of others; it means worthy of praise, honor, or worship; it means being superb, for example, superbly skilled. It also means, and not merely semantically, that there necessarily exists also the opposite of good, viz., evil. OK, that's obvious and I'll come back to that. But goodness referring to God means a lot more. God's goodness is transcendent. God's goodness doesn't depend on His virtues such as holiness or love or justice, etc, for it is independent of them all. There is nothing beyond His goodness, it is complete and perfect. God doesn't merely possess goodness (as we can); He *is* good, fully good. Out of God's goodness flow righteousness, love and justice. God is good morally, aesthetically, and even metaphysically. So God is beautiful and all His handiwork is beautiful. He is faithful to His Word, and His justice is perfect (principled, never arbitrary). Thus, for example, it is good that guilty, wicked people deserve and suffer punishment, and those who do good are rewarded. Even God's wrath is good. His wisdom is good. God sovereignly rules His creation in perfect goodness, that is, so that all His creatures flourish and prosper and enjoy the grace of life. God is supremely benevolent; His benevolence is generous beyond human comprehension. Love, mercy and grace flow from His goodness. And He is the highest good possible for us. Everything He says and does is good, therefore for our ultimate good. His commands and instructions are morally good and for our good; and it is for our good that we obey Him. And one more very essential thing His goodness means: That we are created as God's image must include the idea that we too are to be good, as He is good. And that brings me to the theme of this lesson, Are we good, and why does it matter? The answers to these questions take us to the very purpose of creation, indeed of our salvation.

Evil is a moral term. It means reprehensible, wicked, offensive. It's a perversion of that which is good. In justice, indeed in goodness, evil necessarily demands punishment. For God to be good, evil cannot be merely abstract or theoretical but a reality. Because God created living beings with moral freedom, it was inevitable that, in this cosmos, evil would surface. God knew that and in His infinite goodness purposed to deal with evil so that at the end, only His goodness would exist. Goodness requires the disposition of all evil; the two cannot co-exist except for the time needed to deal with it. So God created time and space and matter. He created a physical world that would serve Him not only in

defeating evil but extirpating evil forever from His presence. This is the theme of all Scripture; the opening words (Genesis 1:3-4) reveal that. Darkness refers to evil and light refers to good. The verses in John 3 confirm that darkness and light in Genesis 1 have great symbolic, moral and thematic significance. So there are two and only two moral positions, good or evil. There's no neutral or compromise state. God will separate the two and as Revelation at the very end (Chapters 21,22) reveals, there will ultimately be no darkness (evil); only light (good) will prevail. This physical creation we call our world is the stage on which the drama of a painfully real and fierce moral conflict takes place. Perhaps God could have accomplished His purpose some other way, but in His infinite wisdom and exhaustive knowledge of all counterfactuals, He chose this physical world with its embodied creatures. Why? Evidently so that the conflict occurs demonstrably, in real life. There must be, in other words, in God's wisdom, a demonstration in time and space of the defeat of evil and the triumph of good.

The conflict involves human creatures using their free will to make moral choices. (Supernatural creatures such as angels had already made their choice.) So there must be tests. All humans are tested. The brevity of the text invites speculation as to what may have happened in the Garden when Adam was tested (Genesis Chapters 2 and 3). I suggest that Adam so loved his wife (as well as himself for how she fulfilled him) that the will to honor God with obedience suddenly vanished. His other love(s) supplanted the love for God that should have controlled his will. His choice to disobey God resulted in an intimate experience of evil, as God had warned. Because of Adam's act of rebellion, God judicially placed all humanity, Adam and all his progeny, under the enslaving control of sin. God gave us our sin nature. (Where else did it come from?) Paul acknowledges this in Romans 1:18-25, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts [to practice sin, to do evil]" and in 11:12, "God has bound all men over to disobedience. . . ." So, although Adam was necessarily (and uniquely) tested from the position of innocence, we, the race of humanity stemming from Adam, are tested from the position of sin and God's just (that is, deserved) condemnation. It appears that God did this so that, when tested, our choice of good would be to save us, rescue us, from our innate, desperate position of sin and the inevitable punishment of sin. We participate in Adam's rebellion, willfully and deliberately. We love ourselves, or other gods, or all manner of other things and ideals, rather than loving God. We love unrighteousness. Sin thrills us.

The testing continues all thru history. We have to choose the good, or suffer eternally as an evil-doer. (Whether the Augustinian or semi-Pelagian view of free will is correct is irrelevant to this discussion.) Israelites in the era of the Old Testament demonstrated their choice of good by honoring God by obeying Torah. As an expression of His goodness, God showed grace to His people by giving them Scriptures to instruct them in the way of good. They were commanded to love God with all their being and to show that love by obeying Him. In return, God offered them "life," that is, prosperity, protection, and blessing. Deuteronomy 30:15ff was the ruling principle for them -- indeed, for all humanity throughout all time. So God entered into a relationship (theologians and expositors call it a covenant) with that nation in the expectation that the people would respond with love. And because of love, obedience. The warning verses at the end of the Book of Joshua make explicit that love for God must be expressed, be demonstrated, by obedience and by serving Him. More: In grace, God also gave that nation precious promises regarding the future that, by believing them and pursuing life based on the truth of those promises, they were honoring Him; believing and living out those promises, they were experiencing good. They were taking the side of God, the side of good. Sadly, there was much failure. In time, they turned obedience out of love for God into obedience out of love of self.

Now, in this era since the Incarnation of the Son, to love God is to love Christ Jesus. The test for people today is really the same as in the Garden: Do we choose good or do we choose evil? Except that the irruption of God in human history has radically changed everything. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's goodness, in Person. We now are offered a relationship with God based on our love of Jesus. So God's offer of "life" for us is to choose Jesus and to demonstrate our love for Him by obeying and serving Him. Our choice must be made with full awareness of its moral essence: We choose Jesus to be on the side of good and to eschew evil. Do we really want to be rescued from sin? Do we really want to be holy? Do we really want to be on the side of God's goodness in His cosmic conflict with evil? Perhaps we really love evil. It's not so much that our default position is sin (it is). Rather, it's that if we know and understand the deliverance that's freely available, and we purposely choose evil and reject the good, so we're fully deserving of condemnation. Let me say this again, because our modern pop-gospel has totally obscured it: There is a profound moral dimension to salvation. If we're taking God's side, the side of good, we despise evil, we loathe the practice of sin and we mortify sin in our lives. And instead we strive earnestly with all our being to be holy and practice righteousness as God instructs in His Word. Our over-riding purpose in life is godliness, viz., being like God. God has designed His cosmos that we must demonstrate our choice of good. We must show it in how we live our life. There's no such thing as "private" or "personal" religion for a believer in Christ. If we don't demonstrate our goodness, all that's there is a fantasy.

Do we *really* love God? Or do we really love sin? Or ourselves? Or the things of this world? Because if we love God, we'll be zealous for His will and His purposes, values, and goodness. The love of self effectively blocks us from loving God. So we wind up on the side of evil after all, a profession of faith notwithstanding. If we love Jesus, we take the side of God in defeating Satan, the personification of evil. We do that by continuing the work of the Son in bringing others into the conflict by sharing the Gospel in expectation of a response of faith. And we bear fruit that rewards Jesus -- that says Thanks to Jesus -- for the sacrifice He made on our behalf. We strive to be just like Christ because we love Him. There has to be this demonstration of our love of Jesus, of our love of the good. God had to demonstrate in time and space His love for us (Romans 5:8) although there may have been other ways He could have expressed grace than by sending the Son to public humiliation. In the same way we show by our lives that we're saved, that it's real. See James Chapter 2. This is not "works" salvation; it's biblical. Oh, but I can almost hear someone saying, "God knows my heart, that I love Him. I don't have to do anything like you say." And my reply is, Yes, God knows your heart, in fact better than you do, and what He sees there may be hardness. We can very easily deceive ourselves. As we've said many times in these lessons, love is as love does. And following Christ is demanding; with great privileges come equally challenging responsibilities.

The climax of this conflict between good and evil is imminent. A 7-years time of severe testing is the Tribulation period described in Revelation, Chapters 6 to 18. A multitude will believe God and take the side of good during that terrible era when massive, ghastly evil is on global display as well as horrendous judgments from heaven. But there also will be multitudes who insist on being on the side of evil. See for example, Revelation 16:9-11. All the world will be forced into making their decision. It's hard to comprehend the power of evil and its iron grip on us. God will close that period by exercising greater power to defeat all the evil that seeks to consume His creation. At the end of history, God's glory will be manifest to all. What is that glory? His love, His justice, His goodness; His superb, beautiful, transcendent Person.

Let's not miss this. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (most translations). So we understand the verse as meaning the standard for us to meet is God's glory, *viz.*, His righteousness, and so sin is "missing the mark." The translation instead could be "All have sinned and lack the glory of God," which means because of sin we fail to reveal God's glory as intended at creation. The verse has the sense of, "For all have sinned and failed to glorify God." Our creational purpose was to bring glory to God. He is glorious, and we were made to reflect that glory as a mirror reflects an image of the real person. The entrance of evil blocks that. Sin impugns God, it offends Him. It says to God, "I hate You, and I hate your goodness. I love evil instead. I love myself instead. So I'll live my life as I please, without reference to You." This is important because the forgiveness of sin doesn't fulfill God's creation intent. Nor even does the possession of eternal life, escaping hell. Indeed, nor does even our glorification. That's because in all of these, we're passive recipients of what God does to us, for us. Yes, to receive Christ, to exercise faith, means we passively receive justification, resurrection life, adoption, and union with Christ. But to glorify God we must be active participants, we must be intentional. That's why we've been commanded to serve Him, and why we must work at our sanctification. It takes self-discipline, it takes effort to know His will, to be like Him, and to be obedient to His instructions. That's how we demonstrate our love of the good. And *that* glorifies God.

Jesus' atoning work purifies us. But it's the gift of the empowering Holy Spirit that enables us to glorify God in our new life in Christ. In today's evangelical churches we distinguish between justification (salvation) and sanctification, and some theologians and church leaders even say that sanctification is optional. The distinction is man-made and false. Salvation is *so that* we can be sanctified, *so that* we can glorify God. We take the side of God in the great creational conflict between good and evil by glorifying Him. Reflect deeply on this!

Yes, God has manifold purposes in view for Creation and for salvation. But as all Scripture is coherent, I suspect so are God's purposes. Thus, for example, In the process of defeating evil, the goodness of God is demonstrated by His taking unworthy creatures into eternal fellowship with Himself to bless them and share Himself with them. Goodness is exalted and evil is banished; God's glory is manifest, and the Son is exalted.

Now let's conclude. God has allowed evil to corrupt His beautiful creation. He has allowed His beloved human creatures to become depraved by sin. But God is in total control. He is sovereign and wise. And good. The insight Joseph had, "you meant it for evil but God meant it for good," sums up how God is carrying out His great creational purposes. God takes that evil and turns it into good. The end will be totally glorious. Let's be sure we're in on the glory. Let's be sure we're participating with God in demonstrating goodness by our obedient and righteous lives and, as we share the Gospel with unbelievers, by our bringing others into the knowledge of good.