

The Big Picture

Insight as to what is happening in the world throughout all history can come from reflecting on Scripture. Despite what secular authorities claim, it has to do entirely with the relationship between our Creator and humanity. In this lesson, I'll try to put together a plausible understanding of what might crassly be termed "the big picture." This lesson deals also with (and hopefully refutes) a bizarre idea that's increasingly popular today in evangelicalism, a movement called "free grace," as well as with what I suspect is an inadequate view of the Gospel. The full picture is *really* big, in fact it's enormous. So to grasp the special relational work of God in history I'm limiting our discussion, leaving out a whole host of sub-themes and motifs that of course are important but which we've discussed already in previous lessons.

I'll begin with God. The God of Scripture is invisible and infinitely transcendent, but so that we are able to know Him He has revealed Himself to us. There are three revelations: Nature, a personal internal witness, and Scripture. In Scripture, we see that God is good, holy, wise, loving, just and truthful. And lots of other attributes, but these are the most important for this study. And this: God is purposeful and bears immense responsibilities. He has an infinitely important, pre-planned purpose for everything He does, and He is responsible for everything that happens in His creation (or that doesn't happen). He bears the responsibility to care for all His creatures, restrain the evil that could be done, and move history along to its intended climax. His perfect character must be expressed in Creation to glorify Himself.

God gave us a measure of free will, which we are to use to make moral choices, choices with respect to God and His will. He made us to live purposefully, having instructed the first man what his duties are, that is, how to serve God. He also made us to be responsible creatures, mirroring His own Person. We're responsible to obey His instructions, and He holds us accountable for our choices, for what we do with our free will. He also instilled in us the ability to love Him (a "heart" for God), or not ("hard-hearted"), which is loving something or someone else. Out of love for God, we're to trust His wisdom and obey Him. But if there's no love for Him, we refuse to obey Him, and that is rebellion. So, out of love for God and trusting in His wisdom and obeying Him, we can be godlike; or we can, because of displaced love, ignore His wisdom and trust in ourselves, thereby rebelling against God. And that, the latter, is what we all do.

God gave Adam a wife, and Adam loved her. He was supposed to love his wife. And she gave him great pleasure. But when the crisis of her foolish disobedience suddenly erupted, Adam had to make a choice in how to respond. Instead of lovingly trusting God's wisdom and obeying God, he trusted in his own wisdom. (What his thinking was is irrelevant, but we can surmise what it might have been. He probably feared he would lose her by taking the issue to God.) He essentially loved himself more than God. So he failed to love God, resulting in ungodly disobedience. And so God consigned all humanity to sin and to the just condemnation that necessarily results from sin. He did that so that we might realize our desperate situation and seize upon His repeated offers of mercy and ultimately his offer of salvation in the Gospel. The episode of Ham showing contempt for his father Noah and the contrasting love for their father of the other two sons is a microcosm of the binary nature of humanity: we honor our Creator, or we dishonor Him.

All thru the Old Testament period of history, people were expected to respond to the written revelation God had made available to them by trusting in the truthfulness, goodness, and wisdom of what God had said. The revelation would be something regarding the future or some other unknowable spiritual truth. And "trust" meant living in such a way that showed that the written word was a reality. Indifference, a cynical response, or simply refusal to believe the revelation or to live in a way appropriate to it, showed contempt for God; it revealed either a hard heart, love of self, or love of some other god. The choice was—*and is*—always binary: honor God or not; be on the side of good or on that of evil.

Much further revelation has been given. We learn that God is a Trinity. And that we are now in the era of the Son. The "Church" is called to honor the Son and, by doing that, honoring the Father. The Son was sent to reveal fully God's Person, to make explicit His will, and to carry out the necessary relational work of God. The "Gospel" is really the expression of God's eternal will and work for the world of humanity, and it's all centered on Jesus, the incarnate Son. Our responsibility now is to know, love, trust and obey the Son. The Son is thereby exalted. That's why we've been given all the New Testament Scripture—partly to inform us of spiritual truths, but more importantly so that we know and can trust God's wisdom for how to live (and think, and value things, and etc), ie, express the goodness of God. The Son is who the Father loves, and the grace of God is to place all who choose or will to honor God *in* the Son and so receive the Father's love and blessing. The cross exalts the Son and makes God's love and will for humanity possible, a just, loving, true and good reality. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus allows Him to share His very life with His followers, so that they will continue His incarnational work on earth of drawing people into the love of God . . . if His followers will do that.

The Gospel is Jesus. It's everything about Jesus! His Person, His teachings and instructions, and His work – then, now and in the future. And it's how we're expected to respond, viz, with loving, obedient trust. Jesus takes us to the Father for an eternity of blessing. So the Gospel offer is really an invitation to know God, to love Him, to trust His wisdom, and especially this: To want to be with Him. So the Gospel is MORE than just rescue from condemnation from sin but transformation here and now into godliness in loving anticipation of being forever with God. The Gospel is to bring us to love God as we ought, ie, exclusively, and to trust His wisdom rather than our own. That means purposefully obeying Him. And responsibly serving Him. And thus we transform to become like Him. It requires repentance, commitment, and a heart for God. The ultimate goal is an eternity of joy and blessing in the very presence of the infinite Creator God, sharing in the love and peace of the Persons of the Trinity.

If all we preach, and if all we think we need or want, is rescue from condemnation, but without the loving, trusting, obedient transformation, we're not fulfilling the purpose of God in offering us salvation. We have a severely truncated Gospel, if we can even call it that. We may not know God as He really is, nor love Him, nor be trusting in His wisdom for life. We're irresponsible and purposeless. If all that salvation means to us is rescue from hell, we're still in love with ourselves.

(Whether God in grace honors our selfish decision to believe in Christ to escape condemnation and do no more than that in this life is unknown; Scripture is silent about that possibility. Scripture is, in many places, silent about what happens to those who fail to respond as expected to the revelation. The wise person will be assiduously vigilant and committed to knowing and doing God's Word so as not to have to experience unexpected but deserved loss.)

To receive Jesus and his teachings as truth certainly honors Him. But to receive those truths in the Word about Him and His work, *and* to obey Him and to serve Him as He's commanded, is to demonstrate that our love of God and our will to be with Him is a true reality. In receiving Jesus, we're expected to be transformed so as to be fit to be with God. That sanctification process is essentially our submission to God's wisdom and goodness. It expresses trust and love. It expresses the responsibility expected of us as human creatures. It expresses God's goodness, to His glory. Serving Jesus as He commanded is to pursue the purposeful life for which we were called. To ignore sanctification and obedient service is basically saying, "My own wisdom is sufficient, I don't see any need to be changed, and being in God's presence is not a priority or something that I value. I really love myself."

It's inescapable: God created us to love Him, to represent Him and to serve Him. Those are creational responsibilities. Salvation *heightens* those responsibilities. Love is treasuring Him above all else, being committed to Him and doing His will. We represent Him by being like Him, ie, godly. We serve Him by obeying His revealed will.

Supposing that, because we have forgiveness of sins and the assurance of eternity in heaven we therefore can live autonomously is the epitome of presumption. It puts God to the test: Will He in grace overlook our indifference or negligence, or will he necessarily discipline or otherwise judge us. It is *never* wise to presume upon God.

The Scriptures come to a close with the Book of Revelation, which is really an extended warning directed at the Church as well as to all humanity. Warning?? Although God's love is on full display throughout this present era in the Person of Jesus, He is also a God of justice. And He made man to be accountable to Him. In this cosmos that God made, it's unavoidable: Having both free will and unique privileges necessarily means being held accountable. This is especially true for followers of Christ, because being adopted by God means that there's an *additional* layer of accountability. Forgiveness of sins doesn't obviate being accountable to our Father. Salvation after all is a relationship. It is, further, an investment, an opportunity, and a privilege. God invests His Spirit in us and expects a return on His investment, and we invest our lives in His service and in return are promised a future reward. God has blessed us with the opportunity to enjoy Him and to serve Him in this life, and it's a stupendous privilege to be allowed access to and to serve our great Creator. The warning is, be faithful to Scripture's demanding requirements for how we are to think and live, and be faithful to our calling. Or else.

I've tried to develop here for readers the great meta-narrative of Scripture, "the big picture." Of course there's lots, lots more. God is great and He is accomplishing spectacularly great things in His Creation. But I hope that this lesson captures the essence of what God is doing with respect to the relationship between God and humanity. Keeping this big picture always in mind should help us to stay focused or centered on God and His will for us. After all, a lot is at stake.