

# An Approach to Understanding the Cosmos<sup>Ⓞ</sup>

- 1. The problem of evil and suffering is the greatest challenge to Christian faith.**
- 2. The problem arises out of the biblical affirmations that God is both truly good and fully powerful.**

*“Why ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “Only God is good” (Matthew 19:17).*

*“I am the LORD, the God of all the peoples of the world. Is anything too hard for me?”  
(Jeremiah 32:27).*

- 3. The problem is mitigated to some extent by understanding the nature of our freedom vis-à-vis God.**

When God made human persons, God gave them/us freedom to choose and to act. To have genuine freedom to act means to possess power that can be exercised independently of God. So, although we humans have made evil actual by our personal choosing, it was God’s prior choice to grant us real freedom that made evil possible.

- 4. The question remains, however, as to how such a circumstance preserves God’s goodness. What’s the value of human freedom if it leads to such pain? Ephesians 3:10-11 provides a clue . . .**

*“God’s purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church. This was his plan from all eternity, and it has now been carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

- 5. There was a prior creation of the angels, the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.” These beings had some measure of freedom vis-à-vis God.**

*“One day the angels came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan the Accuser came with them”  
(Job 1:6).*

- 6. Some of these beings used their freedom to rebel against God, and there was war in heaven.**

*“Then there was war in heaven. Michael and the angels under his command fought the dragon and his angels” (Revelation 12:7).*

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<sup>Ⓞ</sup> This outline makes inferences that go beyond what can be clearly seen in scripture, and is therefore offered as suggestive. (David C. Stancil, Ph.D., 2/18/2001)

## 7. **Satan and his cohorts were defeated and cast out of the heavenly realms.**

“Yes,” he told them, “I saw Satan falling from heaven as a flash of lightning!” (Luke 10:18).

“Then this further message came to me from the LORD: ‘Son of man, weep for the king of Tyre. Give him this message from the Sovereign LORD: You were the perfection of wisdom and beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. Your clothing was adorned with every precious stone—red carnelian, chrysolite, white moonstone, beryl, onyx, jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald—all beautifully crafted for you and set in the finest gold. They were given to you on the day you were created. I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire.

“You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you. Your great wealth filled you with violence, and you sinned. So I banished you from the mountain of God. I expelled you, O mighty guardian, from your place among the stones of fire. Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth and exposed you to the curious gaze of kings. You defiled your sanctuaries with your many sins and your dishonest trade. So I brought fire from within you, and it consumed you. I let it burn you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching. All who knew you are appalled at your fate. You have come to a terrible end, and you are no more” (Ezekiel 28:11-19).

“How you are fallen from heaven, O shining star, son of the morning! You have been thrown down to the earth, you who destroyed the nations of the world. For you said to yourself, ‘I will ascend to heaven and set my throne above God’s stars. I will preside on the mountain of the gods far away in the north. I will climb to the highest heavens and be like the Most High.’ But instead, you will be brought down to the place of the dead, down to its lowest depths” (Isaiah 14:12-15, [Babylon]).

## 8. **At some point thereafter, God decided to create again, this time granting an even more radical freedom to the humans that would be created.**

It would seem that the rulers and authorities in God’s service approached God and said, “With all due respect, Sir, the last time you did this, things didn’t turn out so well. Are you sure that this is a good idea?”

## 9. **God had a purpose in this new creation.**

“Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes” (Ephesians 1:4).

“God’s purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church. This was his plan from all eternity, and it has now been carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:10-11).

C.S. Lewis called Earth “the Silent Planet.” He thought that Earth is Heaven’s Alcatraz, cut off from the normal communications and commerce of the universe. Lewis thought that God’s creation of humans as free beings right here in the middle of Satan’s prison camp was the ultimate “in your face, Satan” from God: “I’m going to show you. I’m going to make creatures out of nothing but dirt, and I’m going to put them in your back yard, where you have access to

them all the time. I'm going to love them so much that they are freely drawn to me, and I'm going to recreate what you destroyed right under your nose."

**10. God knew how these new creatures (humans) would use their freedom—that there would be rebellion once again . . . and God was prepared to deal with this second rebellion in a different way.**

*"And all the people who belong to this world [the rebels of the current creation] worshiped the beast [Satan's ambassador on earth]. They are the ones whose names were not written in the Book of Life, which belongs to the Lamb who was killed before the world was made" (Revelation 13:8).*

*"God chose him for this purpose long before the world began, but now in these final days, he was sent to the earth for all to see. And he did this for you" (1 Peter 1:20).*

Carl Bates has suggested that the Cross of Jesus has a more fundamental meaning than that of human redemption from the evil we have created. According to Bates, the Cross is first of all God's way of taking responsibility for having created a world in which evil is possible, taking into the Divine Being the enormity of suffering that has ensued and rendering it impotent with respect to eternity.<sup>1</sup>

**11. Jesus' death and resurrection defeated the Second Rebellion. The Wall is down!**

*"The time of judgment for the world has come, when the prince of this world will be cast out" (John 12:31).*

*"For Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us" (Ephesians 2:14).*

*"He is the Lord over every ruler and authority in the universe" (Colossians 2:10).*

**12. This defeat made possible the Great Reversal, through which the warring parties might be reconciled, creating a New Reality on the other side of War.**

*"What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"*

*"All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. This is the wonderful message he has given us to tell others." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19).*

*"Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).*

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Bates, sermon at Lakeside Baptist Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 5, 1983.

*“Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and sympathetic? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose” (Philippians 2:1-2).*

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband.*

*“I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.’*

*“And the one sitting on the throne said, ‘Look, I am making all things new!’ And then he said to me, ‘Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true’” (Revelation 21:1-5).*

**13. While Satan has been defeated in the ultimate sense, vis-à-vis God, he continues to subvert the accomplishment of reconciliation among humans by every means possible.**

*“A final word: Be strong with the Lord's mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies and tricks of the Devil. For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.*

*“Use every piece of God's armor to resist the enemy in the time of evil, so that after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the sturdy belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News, so that you will be fully prepared. In every battle you will need faith as your shield to stop the fiery arrows aimed at you by Satan. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:10-17).*

**14. The process of the Great Reversal continues until this very moment, and will continue until God says, “Enough!”**

*“The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and everything in them will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be exposed to judgment” (2 Peter 3:9-10).*

*“You also must be ready all the time. For the Son of Man will come when least expected” (Matthew 24:44).*

**15. The rulers and authorities continue to watch to see whether the Redeemed Reality God envisions can indeed come into being . . . and whether it will be worth its cost.**

*“God's purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church” (Ephesians 3:10).*

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily hinders our progress. And let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish. He was willing to die a shameful death on the cross because of the joy he knew would be his afterward. Now he is seated in the place of highest honor beside God's throne in heaven” (Hebrews 12:1-2).*

**16. And so it is that what you and I choose to do and what we choose not to do has cosmic significance. Is it true that love is stronger than hatred? Your life, my life, and especially our life together, answers that eternal question, this very day.**

*“For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (Ephesians 2:10).*

*“God's purpose was to show his wisdom in all its rich variety to all the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. They will see this when Jews and Gentiles are joined together in his church” (Ephesians 3:10).*

*“Now glory be to God! By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope. May he be given glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever through endless ages. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21)!*

