

Back to Basics: God's Purpose or "A Brief History of All that Is"

Ephesians 3:2-12 ¹

As we conclude our brief survey of "Back to Basics," this morning's journey will be rather unlike the previous four. I invite you to join me for a little while on an amazing journey that begins before time began and ends after time is no more. Rather than looking deeply at just a few verses of Scripture, we're going on an IMAX experience that looks at the "back story" of Creation. We're going to experience "A Brief History of All that Is." You may want to buckle your seat belt.

While I believe the journey on which I'm going to take you is quite consistent with Scripture, I will draw conclusions that go beyond what is clearly stated in the Bible. I commend these thoughts to you for your own study and reflection. The online version of this message will include Scripture references beyond what we look at this morning, and I encourage you to study them for yourselves. So here we go

Last September astronomers released a remarkable photograph called the Hubble Extreme Deep Field, which is the deepest optical view ever gained into the origins of the universe. This photograph shows the state of the universe 13.2 billion years ago,² but we're going farther back than that: "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*" (Genesis 1:1-2).

With respect to creation, the Bible tells us that Jesus "*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*" (Colossians 1:15-17). But we've still not gone back far enough.

The Bible also tells us that **God chose us in Christ "before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ"** (Ephesians 1:4-5a). This is crucial information for understanding what comes later. The Bible tells us that before Creation ever occurred, God already knew you, already loved you, and built the Cosmos itself as a delightful place for you to call home.

Now at some point prior to the creation of humankind, God had already created beings the Bible calls "*rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms*" (Ephesians 3:10). In the beginning, these beings served and worshiped God, but, having some measure of freedom with respect to God, some of them chose to rebel against God and there was war in heaven (Revelation 12:7).

One of these beings, whom the Bible calls "Satan," was apparently the ringleader of the rebellion. John's Revelation describes that event in more detail: "*Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 11, 2012.

² Using other methods, such as the Wilkinson anisotropy probe, the actual age of the universe has been calculated to be 13.75 billion years. The Wilkinson probe has been able to view events within nanoseconds of the Big Bang (creation) <http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/>.

dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him” (Revelation 12:7-9).³

After the rebellion was defeated, Satan was imprisoned, together with those who had joined him in opposing God. Jesus told His disciples that “*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*” (Luke 10:18).

To put this another way, Satan and his allies were banished to “Heaven’s Alcatraz,” a planet C. S. Lewis called “The Silent Planet,” cut off from the normal communication and commerce of the universe,⁴ and that planet happens to be the one on which we live.

At some point after this, the time came when God planned to create humankind, granting us even more radical freedom than had been given to the angels. When that purpose was announced, it appears that the rulers and authorities in God’s service approached God in the heavenly council (see Job 1:6) and said something like this: “With all due respect, Sir, the last time you created free beings, things didn’t turn out so well. Are you sure you want to do this?” Of course God *was* sure about that, since we’ve already seen that “[God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4).

In Lewis’s opinion—and I’m inclined to agree with him—God’s creation of humans as free beings right here in the middle of Satan’s prison camp was the ultimate “in your face” from God to Satan. It’s as if God said to Satan, “*I’m going to show you. I’m going to make a new race of creatures with free will such as you have, and I’m going to put them in your backyard, where you have access to them all the time. And 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.*”

It’s at this point that we begin to become able to understand the verses that I believe are the key to understanding the whole message of the Bible. Indeed, I think these verses from Paul provide the key to understanding all that is:

*“Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord**”* (Ephesians 3:8-11).

Let’s unpack that a bit. First of all, before our ancestors were created in the far recesses of the past, God already knew how they would use their freedom (and we after them). There would be rebellion once again, but God would deal with this second rebellion in a different way.

Not only did God love us and choose us in Christ before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), but Jesus, the Lamb of God, was also “**slain from the creation of the world**” (Revelation 13:8), entering “*the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption*” (Hebrews 9:12). Our treasured place in God’s heart, our rebellion, and our redemption, were all established before the moment of Creation itself.

Well, God did create again, as Genesis records, and rebellion did come again, as Adam and Eve chose to listen to the evil counsel of “the ancient serpent who leads who whole world

³ See also Ezekiel 28:11-19 and Isaiah 14:12-17.

⁴ C. S. Lewis *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938; New York: Scribner’s, 2003).

astray” (Revelation 12:9). After that tragic trickery, God said to the serpent, “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). And so already, only three chapters into the biblical story, God reveals the end from the beginning: as God’s plan unfolds, Satan will be allowed to harm God’s Messiah but will himself be destroyed in that effort.

Fast forward now to Harran, in what we know as south central Turkey. It was there, some 4,000 years ago, that God said to a man named Abram, “*Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you . . . and **all peoples on earth will be blessed through you***” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Through the descendants of Abraham who came to be known as the nation of Israel, the mystery of God’s plan began to be uncovered, bit by bit. Through Moses and the Law given at Mount Sinai, God told Israel that the way to recover relationship with God on the other side of our rebellion is through the shedding of innocent blood on our behalf. While we do not fully understand to this day why blood sacrifice is necessary or how it works to restore relationship with God, the Bible is nevertheless very clear about the fact that it is and it does (Hebrews 9:22).

In the beginning, the sacrifice was that of unblemished animals; in the end, the sacrifice would be God’s own sacrifice through the willing death of Jesus, the Lamb “*slain from the creation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8; John 10:17-18; 1 Peter 1:20).⁵ While Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself did indeed make possible the forgiveness of our sin, Carl Bates has suggested that Jesus’ death 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 God’s own Being the enormity of suffering that has ensued from that ancient decision to create once more and rendering the evil that has followed impotent with respect to eternity.⁶ Before speaking the Word of Creation, God already knew what we would do with our freedom, and had determined in advance to pay the price for our rebellion Himself.

And, although God’s initial unveiling of this mystery came through Israel, it has been God’s plan from the beginning that the undoing of Satan’s evil intent should include all humankind who choose to be included. A significant part of the divine “*mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 3:6). **Everyone is included, if they wish to be**, since Jesus is indeed “*able to save completely those who come to God through him*” (Hebrews 7:25).

“*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, NLT).

That’s the Good News, and it is Good News indeed! Unfortunately, there’s bad news, too. The bad news is that while Satan has been defeated in the ultimate sense, he continues

⁵ Rick Larson has compellingly demonstrated that God did indeed determine the moment of Jesus’ death at the moment of creation. See www.bethlehemstar.net.

⁶Carl Bates, sermon at Lakeside Baptist Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 5, 1983.

to subvert the accomplishment of reconciliation among humans by every means possible. That's why Paul warned us to "*Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand*" (Ephesians 6:10-13).

This warning notwithstanding, more Good News remains. Not only was Jesus "*sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; **he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him***" (Hebrews 9:28). The Bible tells us that "*when the times reach their fulfillment,*" God's eternal purpose will indeed be achieved: "*to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ*" (Ephesians 1:10).

- When that time comes, every knee will bow to Jesus, "*in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11).
- When that time comes, God will create "*a new heaven and a new earth*" and the separation that began in Eden will be undone forever.
- When that time comes, God's dwelling place will be among His people in the New Jerusalem. "*They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*" (Revelation 21:3).
- When that time comes, when time has reached its conclusion and God's promises have reached their fulfillment, "*the manifold wisdom of God [will indeed] be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Ephesians 3:11).

Although we who are in Christ do indeed look forward eagerly to His return, we have no idea when that will be. And while the Bible does give us some clues about that, Jesus told us that "*about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son, but only the Father. . . . So you must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him*" (Matthew 24:36, 44).

Until our Lord returns, the rulers and authorities continue to watch to see whether the Redeemed Reality God plans can indeed come into being, and whether, if so, it will prove to be worth what it cost in suffering—both ours and God's. Those rulers and authorities are watching us at this very moment, together the faithful ones who have left this life and who await the final resurrection at the end of time.

And so it is that as we live our lives today, you and I are called to join the struggle to establish God's Kingdom "*on earth as it is in heaven*" (Matthew 6:10), right under Satan's nose. As we live our lives today, you and I are called to act as guides to show others the way Home.

And so it is that what you and I choose to do and what we choose not to do actually has cosmic significance. Is it really true that love is stronger than hatred? Will God's choice to create us be vindicated when all is said and done? Your life, my life, and especially our life together, helps to answer that eternal question this very day.

Can you imagine anything more important or anything more exciting to do with your life than this? Working for the FBI or the NSA or the CIA or the Secret Service or Homeland

Security are as nothing compared such adventure. Jesus actually told us that it's worth selling everything you have to get on board with this Divine Insurgency (Matthew 13:44).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2a).

And *“now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen”* (Ephesians 3:20-21).