

Restoring the image of God — Origin & Destiny

Creation

I want you to imagine a roiling chaotic watery blackness. There's no structure, no form, no law, no god. There's no purpose, no reason, no light, no life. This is as far from the will and purpose of God as you can be. Suddenly, the Word of God thrusts itself into the watery darkness and declares, "Let there be light," and like a strobe beam cutting through the deepest and blackest doom, the light shone out of darkness.

I want to ask you a question, "What is this scene? What am I describing?"

If you answer, "Creation," you're not wrong. This is what is described in the first three verses of Genesis. But that's not all, because according to Paul, I'm also describing the new creation of the human heart.

"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Paul takes the text of Genesis, and applies it to the new creation of the spiritual man.

There's a huge debate today about the first chapters of Genesis. Is it true? Is it reality? Is it scientifically accurate? Is it a phenomenological account? Is it allegory? The philosophers of our day use big words and sophisticated ideas. Today, we understand science, philosophy, theology and ethics all as different categories of knowledge. But it wasn't always so. In Jesus' day, the Greek study of *physis*—the word from which we derive our modern day physics—meant the study of reality, the study of how things are. The study of *physis* included the nature of matter, but it also included the nature of gods.

So, if we ask the question, "What type of text do we have in Genesis? And how should we read it?" I'd suggest that the answer is this: It is a text that describes reality—physical and spiritual reality. It provides the foundations for understanding the relationship between God, Nature and Man. I'd also suggest this: That the text can be, and must be, read on multiple levels. We view Jesus as reading this text historically (Mark 10:6–9), and we view Paul as reading it allegorically (Ephesians 5:31–32), but history and allegory are big distinctions in our world that maybe shouldn't be seen as being at odds with one another. I'd like to suggest that scripture is multi-valued. It demands to be read as reality, as described on multiple levels.

So, the roiling chaotic watery blackness describes the state of being without God. Without God's order. Without God's purpose. Without God's light. Without God's life. I'm talking about the state of the universe before creation; and I'm talking about the state of the human heart before it responds to the command of the Word of God.

Notice that the text in Genesis 1 describes God speaking light into existence (Genesis 1:3). Then it says:

“And God saw that the light was good” (Genesis 1:4a).

But it never comments that darkness is good. Instead, it says,

“God separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:4b).

So, when John is describing the reality of the New Jerusalem, he uses this same symbolic language to describe God’s plan.

“The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it ... [for] there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:23a, 25b).

God imposed His will at creation, separating darkness from light, and putting both in its proper place, and it is good. Yet it’s not until the New Jerusalem that perfection is established, by abolishing night entirely.

God immerses Himself in the chaotic watery blackness in order to inject His Light, His Order, His Life, to separate darkness from light, so that light will shine more and more brightly until it reaches the full light of day (Proverbs 4:18) which never ceases (Revelation 21:25). And yes, we’re describing origin and destiny, creation and new creation, nature and the human heart.

If you’re anything like me, you’ve absorbed a mental model that says heaven is somewhere else in the universe, far, far away. But that’s not the image you get from Genesis, nor the rest of scripture. For on the second day, God

“... separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse.” “And God called the expanse Heaven” (Genesis 1:7, 8a).

And yes, this is describing the differentiation of ocean from the sky. But that’s not all the word “heaven” indicates. For heaven describes the place where God lives. Genesis doesn’t picture God as coming from a long way away to create this world. It describes God creating earth and heaven together (*cf* Genesis 1:1). Heaven is intricately and intimately interconnected with earth. Heaven is all around us; God is here—you just have to have the eyes to see (2 Kings 6:17; Matthew 26:53).

Revelation says the ultimate destiny is that heaven and earth will be one. That all eyes will see Him (Revelation 1:7). That there will be a new heaven and a new earth, where the dwelling place of God is with man (Revelation 21:1, 3). The new heaven and new earth is seen by a redeemed humanity whose eyes have been opened (Isaiah 42:7; Luke 24:31; Acts 26:18; Revelation 3:18), so they might see the reality of God’s presence.

On the third day, God separated Land from Seas. Land provides vegetation, food. Sustenance for life.

The chaos of the watery deep has now been restrained to the Seas. God has imposed His Will on darkness and water, to separate them into a set domain. Later in scripture, we find

that the heart of the seas is equated with the Satanic domain (Ezekiel 27, 28), which is why Revelation says that the new heaven and the new earth has no Sea (Revelation 21:1). What began as good is now perfect.

The fourth day lays the foundations for time keeping, holy time. Day. Night. Signs. Seasons. Years. The basis for daily, monthly and annual observance. One of the common refrains throughout scripture is to know the present time (Matthew 16:3; Romans 13:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:6). We can know the time, because God established the means for us to know it. Note that this text really doesn't provide content for what those signs and seasons are. Simply that God provided for their existence.

And in our destiny, while signs and seasons exist (Isaiah 66:23; Revelation 22:2), the future is eternal.

Then God created sea creatures and birds on the fourth day. And land animals on the fifth day. Living, animate beings who are created in harmony with God, but unable to understand Him. The narrative arrives at the creation of Man.

God's image bearer

In the creation of Man, God does something truly extraordinary. He takes His glory, and shares it with Man. He makes Man in His Image. What does this mean? Let's read.

“God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26a).

What does it mean, “in our image” or “after our likeness”?

Likely you've heard a range of answers describing what this means. Perhaps you've heard it said Man has God's nature. Perhaps you've heard it said that Man resembles God physically. While these answers may be right, they are derivations from scripture itself, rather than the answer scripture actually gives.

Let's look for the actual answer scripture gives to this question. Notice the first sentence in verse 26 introduces the idea; the remainder of the verse explains the idea; and verse 27 decisively concludes it.

“So God created man in his own image
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.
And God blessed them.” (Genesis 1:27, 28a).

This is a technique of first and last reference. The first reference begins the section of text. The last reference concludes it. The passage in the middle provides the content, or explanation. This is a common way scripture marks sections of the text to be read together.

So, what's the answer? The answer is found in between the first and last reference. So, the answer to what Man being in God's image is, is given by:

“Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26b).

That’s the answer. Man is in the image of God because He is given dominion. God has dominion over His creation by virtue of His creative power. God rules here because of the authority of His creation. He had imposed Himself on the chaos and created order. Thus God had established His right to rule. God’s delegation of this authority to Man is what is described as “being in the image of God.”

Now, from the fact that Man is given dominion, we can deduce the fact that Man is created in harmony with God’s nature, that God’s will beat in the heart of Man, and so forth. But it helps to pay attention to the structure of scripture in order to understand how scripture defines its own terms.

God’s Will

To this point, the creation narrative has been about God’s Word acting directly. God speaks, and the creative power of His Word brings things to pass. But now God has created a free moral agent. When it comes to this free moral agent, God doesn’t bring things to pass Himself, instead He enunciates His Will, trusting in Man to freely respond to and echo this Will in his life and conduct.

So God gives His Image Bearers a series of instructions.

“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth
and subdue it and have dominion
over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air,
and over every living thing that moves on the Land” (Genesis 1:28).

And then God establishes the precept of what constitutes food.

“Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food” (Genesis 1:29).

God’s Rule

The creation narrative has God acting primarily through His Word. Then God’s Will for humanity is outlined through His Word. These two sections are summarised and brought together in this next section, where God acts. God brings together the physical and spiritual, the moral and ethical, creation and will, providing His Image-Bearer with God’s-Will-by-Example.

“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day

and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:1–3).

So we know that God has created this good world. God has imposed His Will and brought order to this chaos. He laid the foundations of the earth. He separated darkness from light, waters from heaven, sea from land. He provided for annual time keeping. He made sea creatures and birds and land animals. Then He made Man in His own Image, reflecting God’s glory. Finally, God came to rest.

God coming to rest is like He is settling onto His Throne, coming to rest within the time and space of His Creation.

Later, people would understand this by picturing gods entering physical temples and inhabiting them. Coming to rest within a temple was saying that the god was living there, had set up headquarters and ruled from there. If you want to see this idea in action, take a look at Psalm 132, which pictures YHWH coming to rest in the temple in Jerusalem.

Well, the creation is like a giant temple, in which the God of the Universe establishes His Presence and His Rule within it. Eden is like the Holiest Place. Excepting that back then, God didn’t need a temple, for the earth is His. So, perhaps it is more accurate to say that God tabernacled with Man. The point is, the seventh day is a sign that God placed His rule here on earth. This is where God is headquartered.

This seventh day rest signifies God’s rule, His dominion, His coming to rest within His place. God was present with Man; and Man was present with God. They saw each other face to face; Man’s heart beat in tune with His Maker.

Each of these instructions is given by a holy God to a Mankind bearing His image. This means that Man’s nature is in sync with His Creator; Man is willing and ready and able to God’s will. God wills it, and Man is ready to do it.

So, God wills Man to eat of every tree of the garden:

“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden...” (Genesis 2:17a).

God’s Law

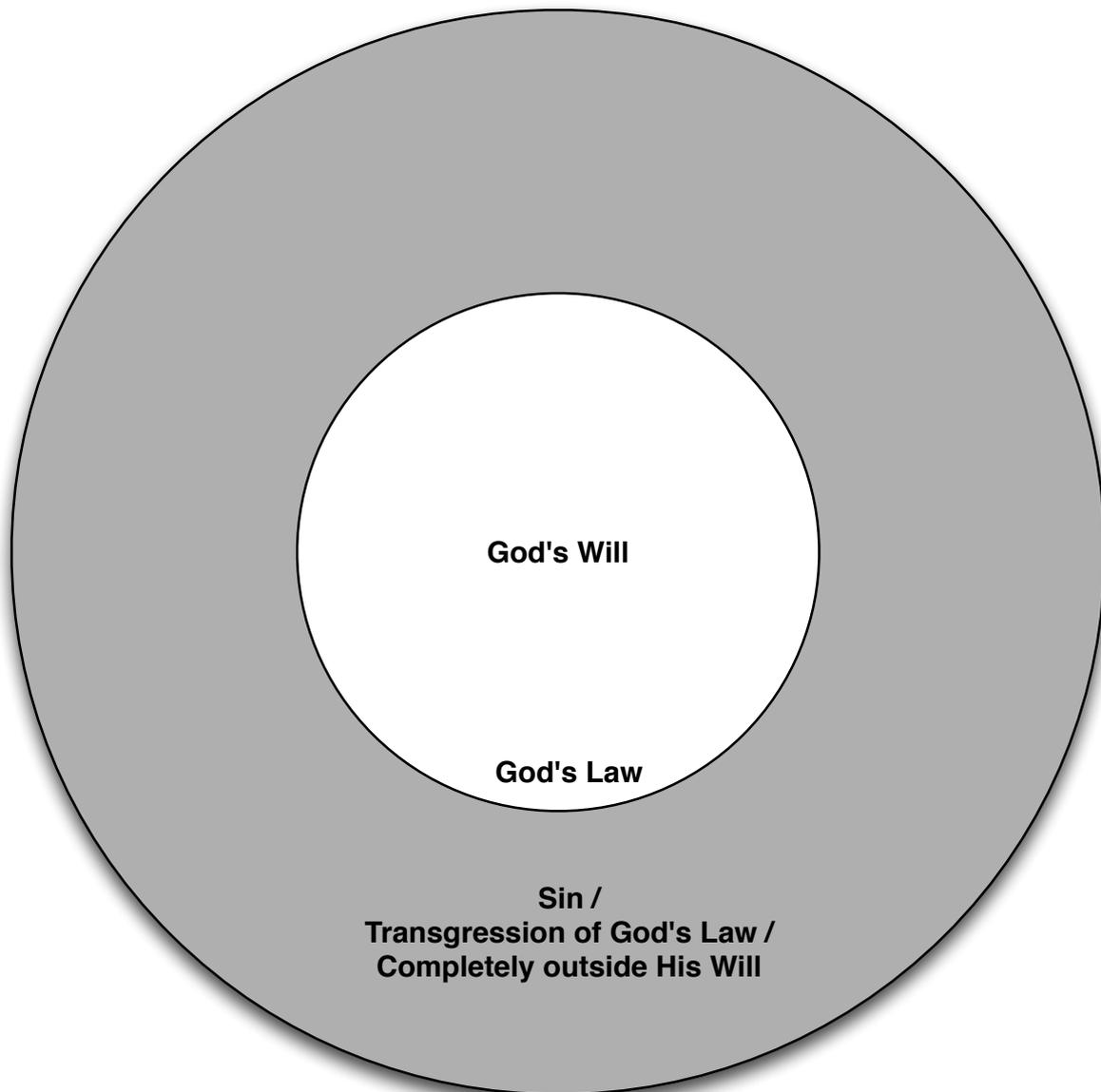
But then God forbids eating from one tree. And the forbidden action carries a penalty.

“... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,
for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

This is law.

Right here in Genesis, we can see the difference between Creation, God’s Will and His Law. With Creation, the Word is active and fulfils its purpose. With God’s Will, God invites Man as a free moral agent, bearing His Own Image, with His Own prerogatives of dominion and rule, to walk in a way consistent with both God’s and Man’s own nature. With

God's Law, God places a boundary marker at the outside of His Will, showing where His Will ceases to operate, and to show that which is forbidden.



Mapping human behaviour against God's Will and His Law

It's like this illustration. God's will sits at the centre of the circle of possible behaviour. There, humanity finds complete freedom. Be in the heart of God's Will, and do as you please. Be in the heart of God's Will, and have complete liberty. Anything inside the circle is permitted, and consistent with God's will. Within the circle, humans are free moral agents, doing as they choose, which is consistent with God's will.

The Law is a boundary marker, showing the edge of the extent of God's will. Behaviour that moves beyond that boundary is transgression. So, the purpose of the Law is to establish the outer boundary of God's Will.

That's why Paul says,

“... the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient...”
(1 Timothy 1:9).

The just don't need to worry about the law, because their focus is on pleasing God, and doing His Will. Their behaviour is at the heart of His Will, far from the edge that is defined by the law. So, the law is for the lawless and disobedient because their behaviour is always at or beyond the edge, because their focus is on pleasing themselves.

Inside the Law, is life and liberty and freedom. Outside the Law is darkness, condemnation and death.

How the image of God was defaced

So we know that, tragically, Man transgressed God's direct commandment. How did Man, bearing the Image, the Glory, the Nature, the Dominion of God, come to transgress the Law? How was that possible?

The answer turns out to be: By first straying from God's Will.

What will? Well, let's read one of God's instructions again.

“...subdue [the earth] and have dominion over [creation] ...”

Let's see what the dictionary says subdue [Hebrew: *kabash*] means:

- subject
- force
- keep under
- bring into bondage
- make subservient
- force
- violate
- dominate
- tread down

How does that word strike you? Doesn't that describe a really strong set of actions? Imagine doing this to God's good creation. Why? Why does God speak of subjection, violation and domination? For what possible reason is God speaking this way?

And the answer is: Because Man needed to dominate the snake. Man needed to exert the dominion that was designed into His very existence, and act according to it. Man needed to rule the creation consistent with the will of God, subjecting the forces of chaos to God's will, just as God had done. For Man was God's image-bearer.

But Adam failed to exert this control. Adam strayed from God's will. Adam failed to exercise dominion over all of creation. And as a result, while Adam was made to stand tall over the animals, he fell below them, being dominated by one of them.

When Adam's lack of dominion resulted in Him transgressing God's Law, the image of God died in Him that very day. The rest of scripture exists to explain how God works with

people in order to restore that image to its full glory, so that the glory of God once again shines from the heart of Mankind.

The ultimate destiny is this:

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3, 4).

Lessons

What have we learned?

1. We need to be prepared to read scripture the way Jesus read scripture, and Paul read scripture. We need to be prepared to read scripture as having meanings at multiple levels, in order to see everything God would have us see.
2. Genesis shows how God’s Word created the reality in which we live: by creating the space-time universe and everything that lives in it; by extending His Will toward us; and by giving us His Law.
3. The Creation account contains symbols that lay the foundation for the rest of the Bible, and especially match the symbols used within Revelation, in order explain the final outcome.
4. Everything else that we discuss in this series has its foundation laid in the Genesis account: food, sabbath, festivals; God’s people, His Will, His Law, Transgression, Restoration.
5. As Christians, we are called to know God’s will and do it. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, remember this: God is calling you, find the centre of His Will, and have abundant JOY in living it. That’s what it means to be His child.