

The Biblical Storyline (cont.)

The biblical words for ‘grace’ generally do not mean anything more than ‘favor.’ But in the New Testament, the word *doxa*, which is translated as ‘grace,’ oftentimes takes on a more particular, theologically significant meaning. In those cases it refers to the divinely initiated and effected solution to the problem of sin. Many of us have been taught clichéd definitions for grace. ‘Unmerited favor’ is one, though it is a pretty bad one, because grace is about what God does in Jesus Christ to attack the problem of sin. One of them that is actually fairly good uses an acronym: ‘God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.’

Since sin is an intruder, it does not fit; it has no right to belong in God’s handiwork. It is an outrageous blasphemy against God and His creation and it is foreign to God’s purposes. Grace is God’s answer; it is His answer to sin. The primary function of grace is the removal of sin. 1 John 3:8 says, “He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” The purpose of grace is the removal of the cancer of sin, and when that cancer is removed, that to which it was attached is returned to its original intent, response, or direction. Therefore grace does not abolish nature but affirms and restores it. In other words the purpose of redemption is not primarily to fit us for a life in heaven, but rather it is primarily to restore us to a proper obedience and for a life of service in the world.

By its nature grace is redirectional, restorational—it is meant to restore the good things of God. Thus Hermann Bavinck said in his book, *The Last Things*, “Christianity did not come into the world to condemn and put under the ban everything which existed beforehand and everywhere, but quite the opposite: to purify from sin everything that was and thus to cause it to answer again to its own nature and purpose.” The fundamental theme which shaped Bavinck’s own theological thought was the principle that grace restores nature. In keeping with that Bavinck also wrote, “Christianity does not introduce a single, substantial foreign element into the creation. It creates no new cosmos but rather makes the cosmos new. It restores what was corrupted by sin. It atones the guilty and cures what is sick; the wounded it heals.”

When we speak of sin and redemption, fall and grace, we are actually talking about the question of a healthy versus a sick reality. Bavinck’s set of medical metaphors follow the example of Calvin. Calvin describes sin as a disease and a contagion, and he spoke of redemption as a transfusion of Christ’s righteousness. Much more recently, Al Wolters has pointed out that virtually all of the biblical terms describing salvation refer to the restoration of lost health, or recovery of lost relationship. The Old Testament understanding of redemption is tied up with the word or the notion of *shalom*, a word that we translate as ‘peace,’ but it actually means more than that. It also denotes health and prosperity. The Old Testament’s understanding of redemption is expressed well in Deuteronomy 5:32-33, “Be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.” In both Testaments, the word ‘redemption’ means to buy back or to buy free. It carries the idea of ransom, liberation, and a return of lost freedom. The term ‘reconciliation’ denotes a return to relationship after alienation and estrangement. ‘Renewal’ means to be restored like *shalom*. Our word ‘salvation’ has the idea of returning to security after a time of sickness and danger. And finally the word ‘regeneration’ means to be born again, to return to life, to be revived. Notice how many of those words have the prefix ‘re-,’ which automatically suggests the idea of return. We should also notice the vision of God that is included in the biblical language of redemption. The biblical God is not a God who simply rescues souls from a damned and damning world. His character is one of a fixer; He is a repairing God; He is one who salvages a fallen world. That means He is just the kind of God you need because you need fixing. The God of Scripture is a jealous God. He

refuses to abandon the work of His hands. He walks away from nothing and there is nothing He cannot fix.

If sin is a misdirection that affects every realm, and if grace is God's answer to that problem, there is therefore nothing that cannot and ought not to be evangelized. No domain of life is excluded from redemption. As sin touches everything, so grace is cosmic in scope; it touches everything. In the Isaac Watts Christmas carol "Joy to the World," the answer to the question, "How big is grace?" is, "Far as the curse is found." That is exactly the witness of Scripture. According to Colossians 1:20, God is reconciling all things to Christ. Therefore the Gospel is relevant to business, education, the arts, and politics, because sin touches them all. A truly biblical understanding of sin as a defection from God's original intent, and sin as a disease which corrupts every aspect of human existence necessitates an appreciation of grace that is equal in scope, equal in radicality, and even more powerful. This means that a biblical understanding of redemption precludes any narrowing of the scope of grace to a purely personalistic understanding of reconciliation. All things are drawn down by the apostasy of sin, so all things are reconciled to God in the sacrifice of the Christ.

The essence of the Christian religion consists in the recreation of the cosmos into the kingdom of God. Salvation is not fundamentally about the individual believer. While it is true that the individual is redeemed, that is only part of the larger, broader, more comprehensive plan of redemption. Both sin and salvation enjoy a radical and universal scope. Nothing in all of creation is neutral, in either the sense that it remains untouched by the fall, or unclaimed by God's kingdom. In John 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. In Matthew 19:28, the evangelist tells us that God is going to renew all things. The entire creation is going to be born again. The word 'renew' in Matthew 19:28 has the same semantic range as the verb 'born again.' It appears again in Titus 3:5, in which it refers to our regeneration. In Matthew 19:28 it is applied to the created order, to everything. Grace restores, revivifies, repairs, renews, redeems, reconstitutes, and reclaims. Yet we are born again, not made utterly new. We are fixed, not replaced. We are not annihilated, nor are we made into angels or heavenly beings. Grace neither destroys nor divinizes—it humanizes. After all it is the fallen man who is not fully human, for he cannot fully function as God intended.

Grace fixes, redirects, and repairs the broken parts of the world and it sets us on the right track again, the track intended by God in His creation. It is man in the entirety of his being, in the entirety of his person, and in the entirety of God's creation that is redeemed. Redemption does not take us up into a supernatural order and it is neither the annihilation of God's original creation, nor the creation of an alternative creation. In the early church Augustine observed that many people had the idea that when you die you go to heaven and that is it, or that you someday get a brand new body. But he argued that those ideas were more in line with the Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls. The more common word for that doctrine would be 'reincarnation.' It is unfortunate that the way many Christians think about redemption is really the doctrine of reincarnation. Bavinck has given a more accurate assessment in saying, "God's honor exists precisely in the fact that He redeems and He renews the same humanity, the same world, the same heaven, and the same earth that have been corrupted and polluted by sin." God's Word of power gives birth to a new world, for both the individual human being and the whole world.

Paul speaks of getting a new body, but one must consider what constitutes newness. I already have a new heart, but it is not a literally new heart—I do not see stitches, or a zipper, from where God opened me up and put in a new heart. In the same way, the new person is one who is reconstituted, redirected, and turned around. Thus the newness we will experience will not be a radically different reality, but a

renewal. We ourselves and the world we live in will be so different, being radically cleansed from sin; it will be like a completely different world.

The only authentic entrance into the Gospel of redemption is the protological assumption that God has created and what God creates is good, and that creation and sin taken together describe the human condition. We are not just sinners; we are image bearers. In God's redemptive act in Christ, we see God not only addressing the problem of sin, but we also see God affirming His creation. In the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity, we see that He takes on our very humanity and that reality teaches us that God can reveal Himself in a completely human manner. Scripture thus maintains the goodness of creation and the divine origin of matter in the incarnation. We can even say that the incarnation of Jesus declares that God likes creation. If God can become flesh, then being flesh cannot be bad. Not only did He become flesh, but as John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel, we beheld His glory. So the incarnation affirms creation.

Furthermore, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead screams the fact that grace is not anti-creational; it is pro-creational. The same flesh that was placed in the tomb is raised to the newness of life in the kingdom of God. When the disciples got to the tomb, they found nothing there—everything that went in came out. If you want to know where God is going in the end, if you want to know what the story is about, look at the resurrection. It is a statement about the conclusion of the story given before the last day. G.C. Berkhouwer once wrote, "Christians cannot seem to make sense of their faith because they do not understand the resurrection." If we did, it would all make sense. And we do not understand because we have turned the resurrection into anything but what it is. We have turned it into a doctrine of the immortality of the soul—it is not. We have turned it into a reduced, or purely personalistic, view of the future—it is not. We have turned it into an idea that we need to forsake this earth so that we can lay hold of heaven—it is not that either. What the resurrection is about is nothing less than the reclamation of all of creation; everything that went into the tomb came out.

The biblical story is a cosmic story. God created all things and He declared the work of His hands very good, for He created all things to praise Him. Yet the creature He made to bear His very image, to exercise authority and exercise lordship within the earthly creation, rebelled against the divine rule. The story reveals the greatness of our salvation. We are the cosmic criminal, and we have brought ourselves under the condemnation of death, and we have brought creation to futility, but God in His love, in His mercy, is unwilling to abandon His work. God saves creation in spite of us. We have been put here to be His helpers, to be His representatives, and He chooses to redeem us in spite of our fallenness. He declared a war on sin and promised redemption, a redemption that would be effected finally in the sacrifice of the Messiah. In the end, the entire creation will be swept clean of sin and its corrosive effects.

Two objections are commonly leveled against this cosmic view of the biblical story. The first is a narrowing of the story, which is really a pietistic reduction. The objection is often put this way: if grace is cosmic, and if the end of the story is about getting rid of sin, it would mean that God's redemptive intention is larger than the salvation of man, but that cannot be so because the Bible spends so much time talking about human beings, as though we are the center of the story. The answer, however, is that we are the center of the story. Human beings have a pivotal role in God's world. Man was set here as God's representative. Man's response to God, whether in obedience or disobedience, will necessarily affect the rest of the created order. The principle is: as man goes, so goes the group. Man's sin is the disease that infects God's creation. Adam's fall brought folly to all, calamity to all. In redemption, since God knows what the heart of the problem is, He began there—dealing with our misdirected, fickle, self-centered hearts. As we are the source of the disease of sin, God applies His redemptive grace first to the

human heart. In His second coming, He will apply that grace to the rest of creation. That is why the New Testament speaks of believers as the first fruits of the kingdom, as in James 1:18 for instance.

The second common objection is a broadening of the story. It is said that if sin restores and heals everything touched by the fall, and if at the end God will be completely victorious, this must inescapably lead to universalism. This objection is rooted in a Christian culture that has taught us the story that God saves us and the world around us does not matter; salvation is anthropocentric. The true biblical story, however, is quite different. In the Noah story, for example, God saves His creation in spite of man, in spite of everything about us. The creation gets a pass because it has been victimized. We do not, because we are the criminals. While God may save the rocks and trees and countless other aspects of the creation, humans are not automatic. We must say ‘yes’ to Jesus Christ; we must faithfully respond.

A common question is that since redemption is relevant to all things, what should be our responsibility as redeemed persons? Should it be the redemption of persons, of souls, and the preaching the Gospel, or should it be a redemptive approach within culture? Yet this question is creating a false dichotomy for us. In this view, the cultural mandate of Genesis 1—to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion—is relegated to unimportance after the fall. But Scripture does not let us off the hook that easily. Looking to the Noah story again, the cultural mandate is repeated almost verbatim to Noah within the context of the fall. It is a mistake to set the cultural mandate over against the redemptive mandate of Matthew 28:19, making it a choice between the two. We are held responsible for both.

It would be better to think of these two mandates in terms of calling. We are not all called to the same things. God has gifted His people with different gifts, and He has called us to different tasks. Some of us are going to be called to evangelism, yet even evangelism should be seen as a little broader. It should be not only evangelism of persons, but evangelism of society, evangelism of different areas of life. Some people work in a public school system because they see their calling to be remedial, to be testimonies, to be witnesses not only to persons but to that very structure. Any calling in creation can be done unto the Lord, and can be a testimony to the world and as it seeks to be faithful to the Lord, and seeks to be a blessing to our fellow man, as it seeks to faithfully till and keep God’s creation, it is a fully Christian calling.

When the Christian tradition is too focused on glorification, it falls into speculation. Sometimes we speak as if we know more about the furniture of heaven than Scripture does and we need to be careful there. For when the Bible talks about the ultimate future, it does it in murmurs and whispers. It does not give us an awful lot. The Bible is really about how we live lives of obedience here and now. While realizing that is the issue, however, there do seem to be some indicators in Scripture that there is more to come. We do see that there are issues of continuity and discontinuity. The story starts with creation and ends with creation, but there is an aspect of glorification such that we are not going home again; we are not going back to the Garden. Scripture tells us that the eternal future will be more and greater than we can imagine.

It should be stressed as well that heaven is real. Between death and the resurrection, should the Lord tarry, Christians will be safe with Him in heaven. Since the time of Calvin, we have called this ‘the intermediate state,’ the time between our personal deaths, and His coming in glory. The key to the intermediate state is that it is intermediate. It is not our final destiny. The Christian’s hope from Scripture is finally the restoration of creation. But some evangelicals have tended to trivialize heaven based on the view that salvation is about the individual. Scripturally, heaven is a busy place, and it is a place of power. For example, Jesus tells us in His model prayer that we are to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Heaven is the power source and the model for obedience, so heaven should

not be minimized. It is simply the case, however, that heaven is not the end of the story. The full restoration of all things, including our bodies and the rest of creation, takes place with the return of Jesus.

One of the problems with our view of heaven, or our view of the future as a whole, is that we have a tendency to read the Bible selectively. A student once stressed to me, for instance, that Paul said that we are citizens of heaven, not of earth, which is from Philippians 3:20. I responded that he should also read the next sentence, which says that we eagerly await a Savior from there. If we read selectively we do not read the full story. Part of our problem is a Christian cultural reality that has tended to import some external ideas into the text, such that we read a kind of immortality of the soul. The solution is not to get rid of presuppositions; they are needed to read anything. Rather we need to acknowledge our presuppositions. We all have them; none of us are objective. Yet once we acknowledge that, we can then open them up so that they can be tested by Scripture. The next step is to choose the best ones you can. Do it intentionally. Do it consciously. Reading the text as though God is sovereign, for instance, is a good presupposition. There are many other presuppositions that are upheld by the text, but the first is to realize that we have presuppositions.

We cannot completely focus on heaven or our life in the new earth because we are still living in this world. One might wonder why, once we are redeemed, we continue to sin. The New Testament answers that we are citizens of two worlds, or two ages—this age and the one to come. While we are truly citizens of that age to come, that age has not completely come yet. It is come in principle, but all its power has not come yet. I still have one foot here in this age, and I still have its habits, temptations, and corruptions. That we are creatures of both this age and the age to come, speaks to our anxiety, speaks to our incompleteness, speaks to the fact that we are still sinners, even though we are redeemed.

Our comfort for the future is actually in the resurrection, which was something that happened in history. In this world in which we live, we are used to cause and effect relationships as being linear, beginning in the past and progressing through the present into the future. Yet in many ways Jesus is the man from the future. He is coming from the eschaton and He is bringing the eschaton with Him. One way Scripture speaks of Him is as the first fruit. On a farm, the first little green shoots that come up from the ground tell you what the mature plant will be. They are the first fruits; they are the promise of what is coming. That is what the resurrection of Jesus is. It is that power of the future that has come into our time to tell us what is coming. Since Jesus has been resurrected, we know where we are going.