



What We Believe: The Big Picture

We could be cheeky and simply say “we just believe what the Bible teaches.” Yes, we know, “*every church says that!*” ... and while every Christian *should* diligently pursue an accurate understanding of God’s word and will, this claim alone is too vague to be of much help without further clarification (it also begs the important questions of interpretation and bias which account largely for the many different views and conclusions reached by us all, including those of us who “*just believe what the Bible teaches*”). Not being clear about what we believe – or worse, not caring what we believe – is nonsense. You know the saying: “*the person who stands for nothing will fall for anything!*” So here is what we understand to be the *big picture* message of the Bible (which is essentially our world-view)



Hubble Space Telescope photo of the Carina Nebula. 1 February 2010. Credit: NASA, ESA, and M. Livio and the Hubble 20th Anniversary Team (STScI). Public domain image accessed at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HH_901_and_HH_902_in_the_Carina_nebula_\(captured_by_the_Hubble_Space_Telescope\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HH_901_and_HH_902_in_the_Carina_nebula_(captured_by_the_Hubble_Space_Telescope).jpg)

In the beginning, God created the cosmos and everything in it, including planet earth and its abundant life. Yes, there was something before *the big bang!* – it was God who caused the whole thing to get started and it is God who keeps it going.

Remember, we're just briefly summarising the story here, not trying to justify it or explain it fully. Look around the website and you'll find plenty of articles and other resources that fill in the gaps and attempt to explain things in more detail, even many of the difficult and controversial issues.

The making of humankind, uniquely created in the image of God, was the climax of God's handiwork. Adam and Eve were created to populate God's world and to exercise dominion and stewardship over His creation *as image bearers* of the Creator. Everything was as God created it to be. Everything was *very good* and it seems that this state of peace (*Shalom*) and rest (*Sabbath*) in God's perfect ordering of things was designed to potentially continue forever ... Paradise! (Genesis 1-2).

The biblical narrative quickly unfolds to inform our understanding about who God is and who we are: humanity's origin, purpose and destiny. Our little personal stories belong within the larger context of God's story (The Big Story); and any proper and adequate understanding of our selves must be seen in relation to our Creator.

So, we need to pause here for a moment to clarify what we mean by 'God':

God is Spirit (as opposed to material); an intelligent and creative being (as opposed to an impersonal force). He is separate from and transcends the material universe which He brought into being. He is outside of time and space - eternally existing - the Great I AM. As creator and upholder of everything, He is omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnipresent (everything exists and occurs in His presence). The biblical narrative goes on to attest to God's righteousness, holiness, and justice; as well as His compassion, mercy, and grace. One New Testament author summarised God simply, but profoundly, with the word love (*agape*). *God is love ...* which brings us to the distinctively Christian understanding of God revealed through the incarnation (when God became human and lived among us). Through the incarnation and redemptive work of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and the subsequent work of regeneration and sanctification wrought by God's Spirit (both of whom were sent by the Father); the mystery of the 'triune' Godhead was made known: God is a divine unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; *a loving comm-unity of One in Three.*

In understanding something of our Creator, we can now understand something of our own creaturely nature, purpose and destiny:

When the triune God who is Love said *let us make humankind in our image* (Genesis 1:26-27) and brought us into being; our fundamental capacity and need for love and relationship, as well as characteristics like cognition, self-awareness, moral conscience and creativity, was therefore *built* into us. We are *embodied spirits*. In common with the rest of God's physical creation, our bodies are made from material elements and subject to His natural laws. But unlike the rest of God's material creation, we each possess a *spirit* which is our metaphysical aspect derived from being creatures fashioned *uniquely* in the image of God (who is Spirit). This is what makes people special and precious above all the other wonders of God's physical creation. Regardless of differences in ethnicity, gender or social status; we are *all* made in the image of the One Creator God which gives *all* human beings innate and equal worth and dignity.

The task of being fully human is therefore to live authentically as image bearers of God: to use our intelligence and creativity to render obedience (worship) and exercise stewardship (ministry) as God's representatives (priests) over His creation (God's Temple); relating to God and to one another out of love or altruism (*agape*, which is an act of will rather than an emotion – selflessly and unconditionally, even sacrificially, choosing to do what is right and beneficial towards the other). That is why Jesus could summarise the basis and objective of God's revealed will as loving God with all your heart and soul and mind; and loving your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40).

Every time we fail in this task, we sin (literally, *falling short of the mark*). And, of course, this is the message of Genesis 3 and 'The Fall'. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the 'forbidden fruit', they signalled their rebellion through seeking to dethrone God and run their own life for themselves (desiring to become 'like God', knowing good and evil). The corrupting influence of sin brought brokenness and dysfunction to humanity (along with the rest of creation, Romans 8:18-25). The Creator's image bearers now reflect a damaged and distorted image because of our sin. Consequently, the human experience is now characterised by shame and fear and blaming (Genesis 3:1-13) that manifests as pride, selfishness, alienation and violence on an individual, family, and national scale (Genesis 3-11). Paradise was thus forfeited through our wilful usurping of God's rule. The result is our 'fallen' world which witnesses all manner and degree of unrighteousness and

suffering. God's good creation, including human beings, is still good. But evil now co-exists with the good as a corruption and abuse of that which is wholesome and righteous and just; infecting life at both the individual level (i.e. personal sin and selfishness) and at the institutional level (i.e. systemic sin perpetrated and perpetuated through much of human culture and its institutions; including family, education, economics, politics, nationalism or tribalism, and religion).

We were made by Love for love. But love *necessitates* free will – our moral capacity to choose. Why the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of Paradise? God wasn't playing cruel tricks here. Love is a risky business because wherever there is opportunity to say yes to Love, there *must also be the opportunity to say no* (otherwise it is coercion or a mechanised/involuntary response rather than freely given love). The 'forbidden fruit' presented the one necessary opportunity to say no to Love and choose 'un-love' (or self-love) instead. The result of saying no to God for us is our own death (separation from God with all of the tragic consequences that 'lost-ness' and alienation brings in this world and in the world to come). The result of our saying no to God for Him is a Father's broken heart as Love's good intentions and our well-being and potential is spoiled by our selfishness. Our choosing to sin does not undermine or over-ride God's sovereignty. Far from it! God will always accomplish His purposes, either with our cooperation or in spite of our indifference or opposition. In fact, God's sovereignty is most fully expressed through His choosing to empower us with free will (if it were any other way, we could not truly be *His image bearers*) ... Love values love so much He is willing to allow the risk of rejection *and* its tragic consequences. But God's love is not defeated by our sin. Love pursues us and prepares a solution to redeem us from our rebellion and the malady of sin and to restore and heal all of creation.

At this critical point the Bible story narrows its focus from Genesis chapter 12 onwards to trace the unfolding of God's plan to redeem His creation through one very special person (Genesis 12:1-3; already hinted at immediately following the rebellion in Genesis 3:15). To accomplish His redemptive purposes, God chooses faithful Abraham and his descendants (Israel), delivering them from slavery in Egypt and giving them the Law of Moses, then strategically placing them in the Promised Land; in part so they may be an example and witness to all humanity of God's righteousness and goodness (e.g. Deuteronomy 4:1-9). Israel's

election was not simply a call to 'private' privilege. God chose them for special 'public' service. The rest of the Old Testament narrative (Israel's history viewed from the sacred perspective) highlights God's faithfulness to His promises in spite of Israel's failure (with very few exceptions) to live up to God's purposes for them. So God's redemptive plan for His sin-sick creation progresses through Abraham and his descendents, beginning (Genesis 12:3) and ending (Malachi 4:1-6) with His promise of a special person coming *with healing in His wings* through whom all people of the earth would be blessed.

About two thousand years ago in a small village in Judea called Bethlehem, that long awaited descendant of Abraham arrived: Jesus the Messiah (God's anointed) - conceived through the Holy Spirit of God and born of the virgin Mary, He was rightly called Immanuel (God with us ... the Word become flesh, God's incarnate Son). The inspired New Testament Scriptures record eye-witness testimony and interpretation of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; and of His subsequent ascension to return to the heavenly realms where He continues to reign at the right hand of the Father. In His atoning *death*, Jesus paid our penalty for our sins, thus making it possible for us all to be reconciled to the Father through Himself. In His *resurrection*, Jesus conquered death, vindicating His claim to divinity and giving us the hope of eternal life. In His *reign*, Jesus rules over all creation as God works to fully accomplish His redemptive purposes which will culminate in the second bodily return of Jesus to judge all humanity and to usher in new heavens and a new earth where God's resurrected and glorified children will reign with Him forever ... the time when God's rule (kingdom) and Paradise will be *fully* restored (cf. Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22).

As members of God's redeemed community - the body of Christ, His church - we seek to participate with God and the Holy Spirit to accomplish His redemptive mission in the world today through Christ Jesus. So God's story becomes our story as we embrace and live out of the true understanding of our world. In accepting Jesus' invitation to follow Him, we are being conformed to the image of His Son who is the express image of God (cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Colossians 1:9-18). In following Jesus, we are modelling to the world what it is to be restored to the image of the One in whose image we were all originally created ... learning what it is to be *fully* human (*imago dei*) and experiencing the abundant new life (*missio dei*) of

freedom (forgiveness) and truth, of peace (Shalom) and rest (Sabbath), found only in Christ Jesus (Matthew 11:27-30; John 10:10; 14:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

We are all the beloved of God; every one of us. Our very being originated and is sustained in and through Him. Our essential purpose lies in serving Him; saying 'yes' to His love. Our destiny is to enjoy Him now and forever. So we seek to share the good news of God's love and grace extended to all people through His Son, and to live faith-fully in anticipation of His Son's return. LORD, come quickly!

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Sistine Chapel: detail of Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. Public domain image accessed at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sistine_Chapel_ceiling_-_Creation_of_Adam#mediaviewer/File:Creaci%C3%B3n_de_Ad%C3%A1n_\(Miguel_%C3%81ngel\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Sistine_Chapel_ceiling_-_Creation_of_Adam#mediaviewer/File:Creaci%C3%B3n_de_Ad%C3%A1n_(Miguel_%C3%81ngel).jpg)

The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for

“In him we live and move and have our being’;
as even some of your own poets have said,
“For we are indeed his offspring.’

Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17:24-31 ESV