

AGATHOS

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CREATION STUDIES



JOSEPH AND ALICE MCKEEN STUDY CENTER

ABOUT US



AGATHOS ἀγαθός

(n.) whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy; whatever is good

Agathos is a journal of Christian thought published annually by members of the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center. The publication is part of the Augustine Collective group of undergraduate Christian journals and the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center is a member of The Consortium of Christian Study Centers. This year, as part of our Bible studies, we have studied creation. In doing this, we have gone beyond Genesis and have examined how this theme manifests itself across the Bible.



Some of the Agathos writers at a conference in Boston



Letter from the Editor

Dear reader,

This year marks the ninth year of publishing our annual publication, Agathos, at the Joseph and Alice McKeen Center in Brunswick, Maine. It is also the first publication I have worked on in my role as Editor in Chief.

In many ways, this publication represents a return to the beginning of things. We have a new Editor, we have studied Creation, and just like the first Agathos ever published, we decided against giving a formal title to the publication.

Ordinarily, we would have decided on a phrase or a word that encapsulates some of the ideas we discussed during the year. This year however, we believe that the name of our journal serves this function very well.

The Greek word “agathos”, meaning “whatever is true, honorable, just, pure” or “whatever is good”, describes the good of God’s creation perfectly. We believe that everything created by God is good and everything good is created by God. This year at our weekly Bible Studies and prayer meetings, we studied God’s good creation and man’s sinful perverting of it.

The articles in the journal this year – written by students attending Bowdoin College and several community members – reflect on these questions and discuss their implications on our lives through both personal and theological approaches. Ultimately, all meditate on the salvation from our sins wrought by the shedding of the blood of our saviour Jesus Christ.

Some readers may not be familiar with words such as “sin” and “salvation”. If you have ever felt guilt or ever did something you felt was wrong, you are beginning to understand. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23 ESV), the Bible says, but thanks be to God that even amid the gloom of Adam and Eve’s transgression against God, He promises a saviour who will “bruise [the] head” (Genesis 3:15 ESV) of the evil one.

From the beginning, therefore, there is hope; and ever since our separation from Him, God has wanted a reconciliation.

It is our hope that, as you read this publication, God will move you in beautiful ways – to relish in his salvation, or perhaps notice your need for salvation for the very first time.

CONTENTS



5	Who Will Show Us The Good At The Beginning Of All Things? Rob and Sim Gregory, <i>Co-Directors of the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center</i>	
		9
	Joy, Pain And The "Messy Middle" Alexander J. Kaye '25, <i>Editor in Chief</i>	
11	Living Our Best Lives Josiah Langworthy, <i>writer</i>	13
		There At The Start
		Victoria Jang '26, <i>writer/designer</i>
15	Called by Name Kiana Gonzalez '26, <i>writer/designer</i>	17
		From The Dust
22	God, Science and Created beings Ruth Olujobi '25, <i>writer</i>	25
		A Confused But Hopeful Believer Of Christ
28	Meditations: The Sovereignty of God in Creation, Corruption, and Renewal Jackson Fenton, <i>writer</i>	Catherine Cao '25, <i>writer</i>
		30
	Whatever Is Good: Goodness Through God's Eye's Daniel Kang '25, <i>writer</i>	
34	Created For God's Purpose Noemi Guzman '26, <i>writer</i>	36
		Fathers
48	In The Beginning Was Hope Gabby Parker, <i>writer</i>	Patrick Kingston '25, <i>writer/designer</i>
		50
	Combatting Complacent Christianity William Graf '26, <i>writer</i>	

Who Will Show Us The Good At The Beginning Of All Things?

Rob and Sim Gregory

The Study Center Perspective

The current year marks the beginning of our 17th year working with students at Bowdoin College, and the 9th year serving these Bowdoin students at the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center. The 2022-2023 edition of the Agathos Journal is also the 9th publication of Bowdoin student and Bowdoin community essays reflecting on our weekly study, prayer and devotions on a yearly theme. The theme this year is our *creation beginnings*.

Our contribution to the journal each year is to reflect on the larger theme of the four-year cycle of *first things, middle things, last things, and all things*; our way of referring to the simple outline for the Christian ministry at Bowdoin College. We adopted this approach in 2014 when the on-campus ministry relocated across the street to a duplex near the edge of campus, affiliated as a member Study Center with the Coalition of Christian Study Centers. As directors of this Study Center, our mission is to help these students develop an increasing awareness of the coordinates of our earthly existence (*the Self, World and Time* –Oliver O’Donovan (2014)) that guide their human agency. These include of course the possibilities, the failures as well as the present imperatives to act “while it is still day” according to the faith of Christian teaching and practices. These three temporal horizons of *beginning, middle, and end* of life are the focus of Jesus’ teaching to his young disciples over a period of ministry similar to the time given to us in the four-year cycle of the student’s life on campus.



We accept those horizons as the norm for our program of scripture reading and study during the short season we are with these students during their liminal years.

The Beginning as a Very Good Place to Start

For the academic year 2022-2023, we take on for the third time questions of creation beginnings. During the first semester our focus was entirely on developing an understanding of the *givenness* of the order of creation. We began the semester with the early church creeds which assumed the Lord God maker of Heaven and Earth as a creedal confession prerequisite to admission into the church life. The early Christians acknowledged the fact of creation as an article of faith. Hebrews 11:3 *By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.* (ESV) The foundational creeds put forth creation as a self-evident truth (*you know this*) and we draw confidence from that position that we may move ahead with a year spent reading the scriptures to understand creation without apologetic attempts to prove what cannot be proven. *You know this!*

The Apostles Creed begins, *I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and Earth*; and the Nicene Creed begins with the words, *We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.*

The faith premise of Christianity rests on beliefs in the God who is the maker of Heaven and Earth. Against these Christian presuppositions, the college student today must expect the scoffers and critics predicted by the apostle Peter, writing in his second letter to the early church, who will deliberately overlook and deny the creation event, and their creatureliness. 2 Peter 3:5 *For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God,* (ESV).

We then examined the New Testament emphasis on New Creation. The scriptures paradoxically offer special insights about the beginnings at the end in the Book of Revelation and the new heaven, the new earth and a new garden that point to the fulfillment of the promise of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1. Revelation 21:1 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.* (ESV) and Revelation 22.1 *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.* The apostle John, writing from the island of Patmos, would go on to say the words he was writing were trustworthy and true, that the God who makes all things new is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Revelation 21. 5-6. It turns out that the end is also a very good place to start.

The premise behind our 4-year catechism for students that opens with “creation beginnings” is that there is on the side of the Christian faith, a *deliberate* confessional commitment to what we know to be the truth of human origins. We did not make ourselves. We arrived at the moment of our birth in a well-ordered universe. First-year students at this highly selective American college undertake a course load that assumes in every academic field that there is an order to be known. That order was there before they arrived and will be there when they leave.

Across the street from the Academy in this modest Study Center we assume without apologetic proof that that same ordered universe which students study in their courses at Bowdoin is also a *morally* ordered universe. These twin assumptions imply that a knowledge of the Creator is essential to understanding our experience of the world in both its order and its disorders. The possibility of shaping moral beliefs about how to live within that world inescapably raises questions about the account we give for our time within it. Hebrews 4.13 *And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.* The Gospel of Jesus Christ transmitted to us is good news that God is vindicating and standing by the world He made in Jesus Christ of Nazareth who is also the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all that is made. On the side of human experience, we are the creatures, the redeemed and those sustained by the providential hand of the Ruler of all nations.

Creation, History and Necessity

The balance of the first semester focused on the nature of the world God made with a particular focus on its *goodness*. We postponed entirely to the second semester our inquiry into the narrative of human sin; the misadventures and failures of the opportunities to live in a world that is the primordial good gift to be received, where all the good we could know comes from God, and all that God created was good. We looked at God's order of creation that brought the apostle John to tears in the Revelation when he learned from an angelic voice that there were matters that *must take place*. These are the *necessities* of human history that point both to order and disorder, and John saw no one in his vision worthy to open the scroll that makes these things intelligible. The Bowdoin student's academic investigations of the aspects of that world given them to study will reveal to them its good order, and delightfully tell them something about its Maker and our Maker. The longer historic narrative of scripture informs them, however, that God has not only ordered

the world in its structure and design with purpose and meaning, but he exercises his providential rule over that world understood as history. The God who made the world is the same God who governs its operations, and neither of these two are clear to us.

At this Study Center we believe that students can benefit from the angel's words to John that dried his tears with a promise of intelligibility about all of the necessities of our creatureliness, both those that are ordered in the nature of things, and those which God orders providentially for his purposes to bless his creation. Revelation 5:5 *And one of the elders said to me, Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals* (ESV). As the students deepen their convictions about a world created to be inhabited and ordered physically and materially to be known for that purpose, the more they come to appreciate the God who governs that contested space. Psalm 2.1 *Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.* (ESV)

Prayers and Creation Psalms

During the course of the summer and continuing into the semester our student leaders conducted regular Thursday evening prayer times centering on the many Psalms of the scriptures that point to God's purpose in creation, reminding us that *the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork*. Psalm 19. 1. We explored together the question of how much of God's purposes for human life are generally revealed in the creation and how much we are dependent on the specially revealed *perfect law of the Lord that revives the soul* (19.7). The creation of God is rich with content to tell us how we are to live within it.

Elohim the God of Creation and Yahweh the God of Redemption

After a few weeks walking our way backwards through the scriptures and observing the way the Old Testament writers identified the God

of creation (Elohim) as the same God who would redeem a people for himself as their covenant Redeemer (Yahweh) we read extended portions of Isaiah's prophecies from chapter 39 through 45 that left no doubt that the God who was in control of the history of Israel was the God who made them. *Thus says God the Lord who created the heavens and stretch them out, who spread out the Earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations....* Isaiah 42. 5 - 6.

Genesis 1 – The Good of the Beginning

We concluded the semester examining Genesis 1 and 2. Our focus primarily was to examine the question of the **good**. It is not self-evident these days what is good if we experience good only idiosyncratically as our subjective preference. The scriptures challenge that cultural presupposition. From the very beginning in Genesis 1, God controls the territory that identifies the good. Paul writes to Timothy in 1st Timothy 4.4 *For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.*

But who can say what is good? Who will arbitrate competing claims to the good? The questions are at once theological and political. The Psalmist acknowledges this broader public anxiety about who and how we might adjust among competing creation-ordered common goods. Psalms 4:6 *There are many who say, Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!* (ESV). We were particularly challenged by a reading of Psalm 119. 65 through 71 to learn about the many ways that we experience the good subjectively, formally, and as a divine command from the Creator who mediates the good to us by the one who is good and does good and teaches us through structures of commands to be obeyed. Psalms 119:68 *You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.* (ESV) The world that is before the college student to know as good is the world that presupposes in that goodness commands

and demands to be obeyed. The Psalmist exclaims *the Heavens pours forth speech* (Psalm 19.1) and that creation speech is both descriptive of the world and prescriptive about our life within it.

Male and Female, He Created Them – In the Beginning

We closed out the first semester with 5 weeks studying the order of creation as it relates to male and female, the dimorphic structure of human life endorsed throughout the scriptures and by the moral teachings of the early church. We observed how the moral codes of the New Testament teaching the church about what it means to be male and what it means to be female, and about the creation ordered structure of marriage was not reacting to the fall of mankind of Genesis 3. Rather, the texts that we examined from Matthew 19 (Jesus teaching), 1 Corinthians chapters 6 and 11, 1st Timothy chapter 2, 1st Peter chapter 2 and Ephesians chapter 5 were a New Testament discourse on the goodness of Genesis 1 and 2. These New Testament moral guides to life as male and female look to the creation before the fall in Eden, thus grounding the moral life in the creation structures of life.

Questions of Creation Beginnings, Sin and Evil

At the time of writing this article we are about to turn the page at the Study Center to begin to review questions of human sin and its origins. We will explore how evil has only a secondary reality, some have called it a quasi-reality, that only appears as a negation of God's good in the order of creation and of God's good in the providential direction and governance of all that he made. Our hope is to end the semester with a clearer understanding of how our readings from the first semester and the readings of the second semester address that question of Psalm 4: *Who will show us the good?* We urge our students at the Study Center to be careful about our words. We hope that these students will not think about the good in casual speech without reflecting back on the way God has shown us the good. In a similar way, we ask the students to think about who they are as male and female, created in the image of God,

and to try to make the effort to discourse on this question using the same words which scripture offers to us to understand both the structure and the purpose behind it. What God made male and female, endorsed throughout the scripture as the normative shape of our humanity - by Jesus and by the apostolic witness in the New Testament - is the exclusive framework for a Christian understanding of masculinity, femininity, marriage, divorce, and sexual immorality. These same words shape our understanding of it!

Biblical words about male and female run through virtually every page of the scripture and cannot be maintained (and never could it seem) without confronting earthly powers with different answers to the question, *who will show us the good*. From the perspective of the Biblical prophets, we must assume that these kingdoms, powers and authorities will assume that they, and not the church, possess that privilege exclusively and against all rivals. For that reason, these studies are made available at the Study Center where they cannot be held at other venues at this campus. Such is the nature of the proclamation of the Christian gospel in increasingly contested spaces.

In spite of this, it remains our joy and privilege to help students at Bowdoin College prepare for life in the church when we see them off at the end of their four-year sojourn among the tall pines of Brunswick, Maine.





JOY, PAIN AND THE 'MESSY MIDDLE'

Alexander J. Kaye

As we have studied Creation at the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center this year, God has put a few things in my heart. The first of which is joy, derived from the salvation from our sins by the blood of Jesus Christ. The second is pain, which we all feel as we travel through this broken world. The third is our awkward, transitory position on this earth – which, to borrow a term mentioned in Bible Study, I will call the ‘messy middle’ – and what we should be feeling, doing, and thinking in the years that we have now after being saved. Each of these three ideas is related to Creation.

Joy

Joy is a fundamental idea in Christianity but where does this joy come from? It comes as a result of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ upon the cross around two thousand years ago and his subsequent resurrection and what that means for those who believe in it. In the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul writes “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9 ESV). Joy, I think, comes from being “saved” – but what are we being saved from?

The Bible tells us that ever since Adam and Eve sinned and ate of the Tree of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden and disobeyed God, humanity has been hostile to God. From that moment onward, we became “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Colossians 1:21) and became “of [our] father the devil” (John 8:44).

“All have sinned” (Romans 3:23), Paul writes, and if we are being honest with ourselves, we all commit acts that fill us with guilt and self-loathing and that our contrary to God’s desires for His creatures. The eating of the fruit meant that we entered into a spiritual death and a “domain of darkness” (Colossians 1:13) and lost the unbridled access and fellowship we had with God in the pre-fall world.

“But thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25), for God has saved us from this desperate condition and justified us before Himself through the shedding of Christ’s blood. Through the sacrifice of he “without sin” (Hebrews 4:15), God’s just wrath has been satisfied on the cross. Those who believe in this and repent of their sins have “passed over from death to life” (John 5:24), thanks to Christ who is “the life” (John 14:6). In the place of hostility, we have been granted peace and reconciliation with God through Christ who is “our peace” (Ephesians 2:14). We who were alienated have been brought into His fold and have reached atonement (etymologically, at + onement) with God. We who were slaves of the devil have been redeemed (from the Latin, *re + emo*, roughly meaning ‘buy back’) to dwell with Him, our God and Maker.

Satan, the accuser, quite rightly has a lot to accuse us for before God. Yet thanks to Jesus Christ, we have been justified and have been forgiven for all our sins. This is a cause for joy, and this is what is meant by salvation.



Pain

But are Christians meant to be in a state of constant bubbly ecstasy because of the joy derived from salvation? Probably not. The reality is that we feel pain in this world. We feel pain when we see brokenness in people we love, the relationships we cherish, the world at large and even in ourselves. Paul writes that “in this tent, we groan” (2 Corinthians 5:4) and indeed we groan often and shed tears, knowing that this world of suffering and injustice is not how God intended it to be.

Genesis offers an explanation for the origins of pain. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, pain and suffering were introduced into the world. God says to Eve, “I will surely multiply your *pain* in childbearing [emphasis mine]” and to Adam, “cursed is the ground because of you; in *pain* you shall eat of it all the days of your life [emphasis mine]” (Genesis 3:16-17). Apart from the spiritual death and corruption of the pre-fall order that took place, a physical death would also eventually take place.

The reality is that we live in a fallen world where pain exists, and this does not change after we are saved. Christ himself says, “in the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33) and for evidence we need only look at the lives and fates of apostles such as Paul and Peter and indeed our own lives. The question then becomes: how are we to live in and think about this ‘messy middle’, as we navigate this fallen world as saved people?

‘Messy Middle’

Though there is much to say about how a Christian ought to live in this world, a fundamental idea that I have dwelt upon this year is that of hope. Let me explain.

An idea that I have neglected or hadn’t appreciated fully until recently is that when Christ rose from the dead, he conquered death. Christ, in the Book of Revelation says, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). The death of death means that we have hope after our mortal coil expires and can hope for eternal life.

When Christ returns to earth, a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) is promised. In it, God “will wipe away every tear from [our] 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 21:4). In these verses I have found hope and encouragement. In this ‘messy middle’ – between salvation and the Second Coming – where our flesh groans for the perfection to come, we have joy in reconciliation and hope in the New Creation.



LIVING OUR BEST LIVES

Josiah Langworthy

(Genesis 2:16-17 ESV, 3, 4:1-16)

In our current society, we have reached a point of decadence. We no longer have the urgent concern for our most basic needs to be met; instead, we have the liberty to pursue personal pleasures and our own immediate gratification. With the liberty of choice, we have moved beyond simply what we need to the broad question of, “What do I prefer?” We have moved from the question of what helps preserve our lives to what helps enrich our lives. In our freedom to pursue a host of available possibilities, we are asking what it means to live our “best lives”. This pursuit is ultimately only possible in accordance with God’s will. The pursuit of our best life is not unique to our generation. It dates back as far as Genesis 3, immediately following creation. At the time, everything was created good and was stated to be good by God Himself. Humanity was given dominion over the Earth and lived in fellowship with God. Sin and death didn’t yet exist. Adam and Eve were given the freedom to pursue anything they desired. God gave them one single rule. They were not to eat the fruit from one particular tree. Despite the fact that they only had one rule to follow, they inevitably failed.

Initially, their actions may not make any sense to us. They were literally given the world and had none of the afflictions that now hinder us. With authority over a world unpolluted by the curse of sin and God’s permission and even encouragement to develop and create, they had the freedom of an incredible scope of possibilities that they could pursue. How could they possibly disobey their only simple instruction? Upon further evaluation, it is the same trend as man’s current relationship with God. Adam and Eve were content with their role in creation until God’s command was phrased differently. The

serpent promised them that eating from the tree would grant them special information that would greatly enrich their lives. Furthermore, this was information that God was hiding from them. He told them that if they ate, they would become like God. The act of defiance that they thought would effectively liberate humanity is what enslaved us. Ultimately, by acting outside God’s will, they incurred all the hardship that we now experience in the world.

After the fall of Man, the pattern of rebellion against God to our own detriment continued without missing a generation. In the first passage in Genesis following Adam and Eve’s exile from Eden, the narrative shifts to their sons. As they grow up, they both offer sacrifices to the Lord. Abel brings a costly gift to God while Cain does not. Their respective heart attitudes are reflected both in their offerings and in God’s response. Cain did not respond well to God’s regard for his brother’s offering over his own. At this point, God speaks to Cain directly. He warns Cain about his anger and tells him that he can be accepted the same way his brother was. Cain ignored God’s instruction and killed his brother in the very next verse. After murdering Abel, Cain showed no remorse for his crime, only self-pity for the punishment he received. Even though God knew the extent of the evil in Cain’s heart and the sin he was capable of, He told him that there is still hope and charged him to improve. Cain’s fate was entirely avoidable. He had the same opportunities as his brother and God went as far as to reach out to Cain directly to give him a verbal warning when Cain was at risk of making a major mistake.

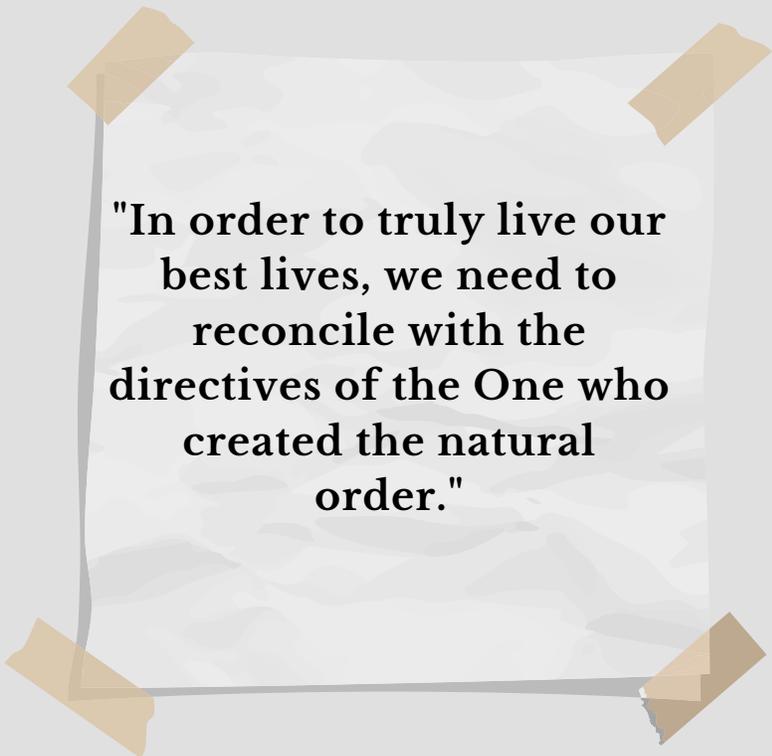
Cain disregarded God's warning and chose to pursue his own desires thinking that he knew better. Like Cain and Abel, we are born into the inheritance of a sinful nature and a life in a broken world. We have the same disdain for God's law and a suspicion of His intentions toward us. We often consider His commands to be restrictive of our freedoms and limiting our true potential. We question the intent behind God's law and conclude that His instructions are either arbitrary or else directly harmful to us.

To truly realize our "best lives", we need to take the created order into account. God created material existence with a certain natural order. The Genesis 1 account of Creation describes the development of various forms of life and specifies that each was made "according to its kind". God created all varieties of life forms with distinct characteristics. While a broad spectrum of variety exists within the world we know, there is an observable natural phenomenon of design. God's vision for Mankind in Genesis 1:28 reflects this sense of order in His directive: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." We are told that we live in a world of order and that we are given authority over it.

The thought of a position of authority and a charge to manage the earth can certainly be a daunting one. Fortunately, we are not left in the dark. God's instructions provide us with a guide for how to best interact with His creation. His Sabbath commands, for example, allow us to optimally interact with creation. A day of rest gives both our bodies and spirits a necessary respite which prepares us for the cycle to begin again. This rhythm of life was modeled by God in creation, by Jesus in His life, and should be followed by us today. Though it may seem like ceasing productive activity would prevent us from reaching our potential, rest actually allows us to be more productive, more connected with our brothers and sisters, and more prepared for what the new week will bring. Jesus makes this point in Mark 2:27.

In the context of the passage, a group of Pharisees was criticizing His disciples for eating bits of grain off the plants as they were walking through a field on a Sabbath. In their elaboration on Mosaic law, the Pharisees had dramatically expanded the restrictions that the Sabbath conveyed on work to include many minuscule tasks such as picking bits of grain while passing by. Jesus reminded them of the intent of the original command when He said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Jesus pointed out to them that the purpose of the Sabbath command was for Man's benefit.

In the same manner as our predecessors, we are inclined to be skeptical of the idea of taking instruction from God. We either doubt His intentions or the reliability of His ideas. We suspect that they are antagonistic toward us or else simply outdated. Our history, however, suggests otherwise. Through repeated trial and error, we have found His commands to be beneficial. Furthermore, an eternal and omniscient being would have a comprehensive understanding of how best to interact with His own creation. In order to truly live our best lives, we need to reconcile with the directives of the One who created the natural order.



"In order to truly live our best lives, we need to reconcile with the directives of the One who created the natural order."

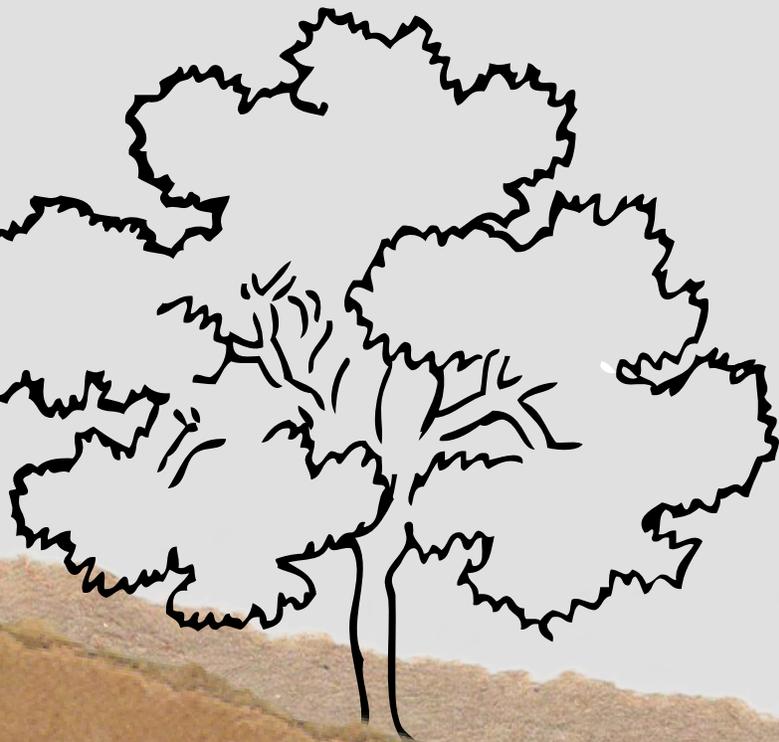
THERE AT THE START

VICTORIA JANG

Many know how the story goes. Adam and Eve disobeyed God; they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and now knew that they were naked. Shame and fear entered their lives. God, being a holy and just creator, could not ignore the situation and carry on as though nothing had happened. Thus, the serpent was cursed, and Adam and Eve were banished from the direct and unfiltered presence of God.

“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return”
(Genesis 3:19 ESV)

There is, however, a crucial detail here that must not be missed. Right as they were being exiled from the garden of Eden, “the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). This last act of God’s direct provision is significant on many levels.



On the surface-level, it was God’s provision for Adam and Eve’s physical bodies, now about to be subjected to the harshness of the wilderness outside the garden. The garments of skin, much more reliable and sturdy than the fig-leave-loin-cloth-situation that Adam and Eve put together for themselves, was God’s gift of protection. The garments of skin would protect them from the heat of the day and warm them in the cool of the night, a token of God’s ever-present care for His creation’s wellbeing and safety despite their disobedience. Even as Adam and Eve turned away from their creator, God continued to provide for them, better than they could provide for themselves.

On a different level, by making for Adam and Eve garments of skins, God was acknowledging a new reality that sin had brought into the world. Previously, before the relationship between God and His creation was marred by sin, there was no need for covering of the body or any form of work or possession; God’s direct presence and provision in the garden were sufficient to fully sustain the entire creation order, humans included. However, now that the relationship was severed by sin, the same system of intimacy was no longer possible. Despite this, God continued to look after His people in new ways, providing for their new needs, staying faithful through change. In our volatility, through all of our inconsistency, God remains the same, “yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Lastly, the garments of skin were an expression of God’s sacrificial love for His people, foreshadowing the coming of Jesus from the very start. An animal was needed to make the garments of skin; an animal needed to be *sacrificed* in order to make the garments. Thus, God’s reaction to our sin, from the very beginning, has been **sacrificial love**. Before Cain or Abel or any other human being could bring a sacrificial offering to God, our Lord was the first to sacrifice an animal to offer us protection.



But, of course, garments of skin, sturdy as they are, cannot provide eternal protection. Over time they wear and they tear, requiring replacements. Does that mean that God's provision and love for us do the same? Not at all. The garments of skin gifted to Adam and Eve were but a shadow, only a glimpse of God's redemptive plan for His creation.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”
(John 3:16)

“But God showed his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”
(Romans 5:8)

The ultimate sacrifice, the pinnacle of God's redemptive love for us came in the form of Jesus Christ. He took our place and was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, so that by his wounds we could be healed (Isaiah 53:5). The first sacrifice was a temporary fix, a palliative only aiding the physical body; the final sacrifice is an everlasting reconciliation, a cure not just for the body but for our souls. Christ has secured for us an eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12), finishing what we could never even begin to do. He has now taken off our dirty, worn, and torn ways of dealing with our fallenness before God and clothed us with his own righteousness.

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness”
(Isaiah 61:10a)

In our disobedience, Christ came in full obedience, sacrificing himself for our redemption. In our rebellion, Christ came in perfect submission, not withholding anything to get us back. This is what all of creation has been groaning for since day one (Romans 8:22); this is what God's deepest longing has been since the moment He caught our scared eyes hiding in the bushes. Ages and ages have all led to this. Just to win us back, just to bring us back into His arms.

From the very beginning, God has been love. There at the start was already sacrifice, grace, and mercy for us. That is who God has been, and that is who He will be forevermore. If His love has persisted through all space, all time, all history, then surely it will not tire of chasing after your soul. If He did not spare even His own son but gave him up to save you, then what more could He desire but to have your heart.

CALLED BY NAME

KIANA GONZALEZ

Human beings are constantly running from God. We deny his existence. We form conclusions based only on our limited knowledge. We look for meaning in anything other than Him. The reason we search for this “greater purpose” is not just because we are broken and He is the solution, but because we were made to be in a relationship with God.

The creation account ends with Adam and Eve alone with God in the garden of Eden, in perfect relationship with Him. But when they both sin, the relationship is severed. Our relationship with the eternal God is fractured when sin and evil enters the world God had made through Adam and Eve. The relationship with mankind is damaged because God is pure goodness, and we cannot be in direct contact with Him when we are not totally pure. In God, there is pureness, goodness, and holiness in absolute terms. For the two to coexist, that is our fallen nature and God, the problem of sin and evil needed a remedy.

I remember starting my college experience, alone for the first time. And I really did feel alone. I had been raised in the church, and I truly loved God, but I found it difficult to stay connected to God. Thank God that I am not dependent on my own strength. It was only until God called me to Himself again, and said “daughter, come back to me” in undeniable ways that I began to embrace His love again. I remember going to church for the first time at school, and the pastor preached about the prodigal son.

“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Luke 15:18-20 ESV

As I thought more about this idea I realized God, who is represented by the father in this parable, is always in search of us, because even though we sinned, and did wrong, God wants us reconciled to Him even when we do not. In the parable, the father was not only waiting in hope for the son to return, but ran toward him, showing the compassion he had for his son. He was always ready with open arms. It is the evil that took us away that continues to keep us from Him.

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Romans 8:7

So God reached out. The truth is, God has been calling us to Him since the beginning, even when we failed. In the garden, He was in search of Adam and Eve, calling out to them:

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’

Genesis 3:8-9

God, being all knowing, was aware of their betrayal. And it was certainly betrayal. He had given them everything they could have desired, including a free will to follow and love Him voluntarily, and they rejected that for momentary pleasure. Regardless, God went out in search of them, calling Adam and Eve back to Him.

And the rest of the story, God's story, follows this way; God, in his endless love, decided to keep calling humankind throughout history. The entire Bible tells of that story. Isaiah is called by God and sent.

*"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I
(Isaiah) said, "Here I am! Send me."
Isaiah 6:8*

Over and over again He proved His boundless love to His precious creation, calling them back to Himself and sending His prophets. Isaiah prophesied of a coming Messiah, one who would take away our sin and our guilt, and bring us back to Him. Who is this Messiah? He is Jesus, God in the flesh. God's ultimate call to us was when he laid down His life for us on a cross, on a hill, for all to see. In this way he *"drew all people to himself,"* (John 12:32).

And He did. The moment that Jesus died the veil in the Jewish temple was ripped in half. This holds more meaning when you realize two things. One, this veil was more like a large curtain, about 60 feet long and 4 inches thick. It was certainly no accident. And more importantly, this veil was the separation between where the Jewish people could worship in the temple, and where the glory of God resided. The miraculous splitting of this veil meant there didn't have to be a separation anymore. God called His people back, to freely be with Him.

And three days later Jesus appears again in a garden, alive again. This time, his disciple Mary is sitting crying, supposing she has lost Him.

*He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus said to her,
"Mary."
John 20:15-16*

God is still calling. He is most certainly calling you. The Word of God promises this,

*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.
Matthew 7:7-8*

If you only turned and listened he would say,

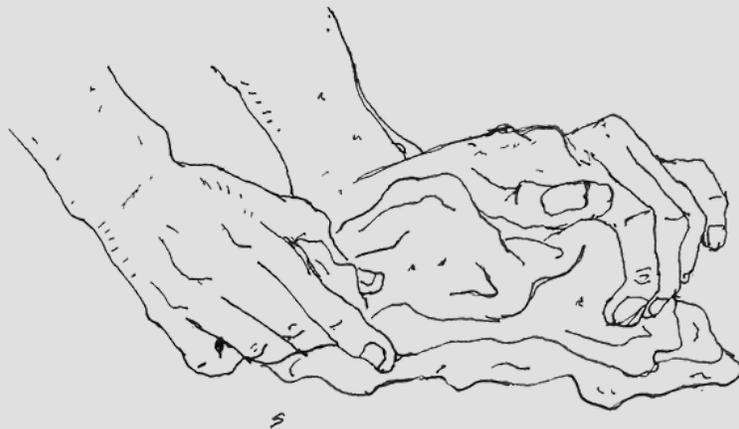
*I have called you by name, you are mine. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."
Isaiah 43:1,5-7*

Your value is so much greater than what you have done, how people perceive you, how you have been treated, and how you have been hurt. Because your worth is defined solely by the fact that your creator who instilled his very image in you and loves you, with a love that is impossible to describe with words. His love goes beyond whatever keeps us from Him. He reaches across. The promise of the gospel is that we who have rejected God have the opportunity to be reconciled to Him in spite of the seemingly impossible barriers. Beyond the brokenness there is a God that calls out beyond the tangled vines and thorns and says...

"Daughter, come back to me."

FROM THE DUST

Sarah Kalonji



From the dust of the ground—there, You began.

With a vision in mind, You turned to Yourself and said, “Let us [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] make mankind in our own image, in our own likeness.” You looked at the dust of the ground and inconceivably, saw a canvas fit to bear *Your* image. Then with Your hands, the hands of a *Potter*, You began modeling—folding, pinching, and sculpting me, *Your clay*. Fearfully and wonderfully, You created all the complexities of my being, even my inmost being. Once formless—You gave me form. Once lifeless—You gave me life.



From the dust of the ground, now I stood upright.
A jar of clay, filled and glazed with Your *Light*.

Seeing all that You had created, You said that “it was very good.” *I was* very good.

Most beloved amongst all Your creation. You took me and placed me in the Garden of Eden, giving me dominion over every living creature that moves on the earth. You provided for *all* my needs. You walked with me and I with You. You commanded me, saying:

“You may surely eat of any tree in the garden; 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 2:16 (ESV)

Then, I met the *serpent*. A creature far more crafty than any other beast of the field You had created. He spoke of what you had commanded me *not* to do, but he told me that I would *not surely die* if I ate of the tree. That my eyes would be opened and I would be like You, knowing good and evil. I looked at the tree and saw that it was good for food, a delight to my eyes, and it would make me wise. I *desired* that—what's there to lose?

So I placed the fruit from the tree within my vessel,

And that's when I realized...the *serpent! He deceived me!*

I *fell* and shattered.
My broken pieces scattered on the ground.

Something within me had changed—
Your *Light!* Where is it?

Darkness has entered.

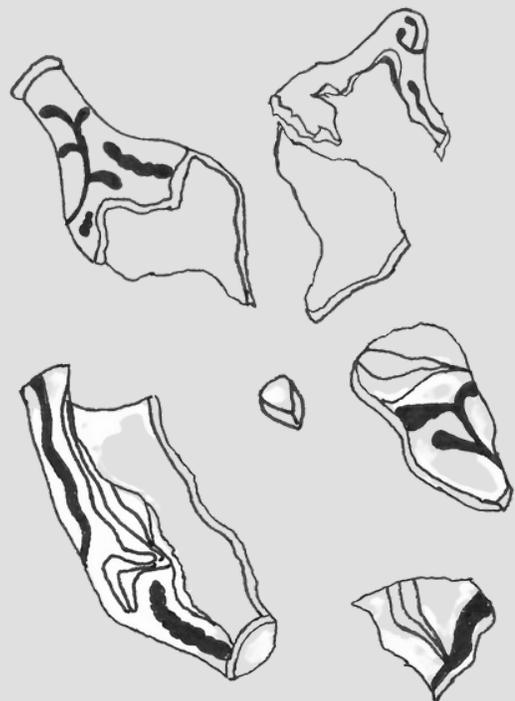
Why couldn't I put myself back together?
I was afraid, filled with shame and hopelessness.
Separated from You,
I am no good.
Separated from You,
I can do no good.

*The Fall came with pain,
The Fall came with sin,
The Fall came with death, and I died.*

Is there any hope for the dead?

But what I did, did not catch You by surprise. For You had already prepared a *sacrifice* for this moment—even before the beginning of time.

Then, You came for me.
But You too were covered in dust.





The Potter became the clay.

Fully God and fully man—Christ Jesus. For me, You *humbly* became as I was, a jar of clay. But unlike me, You embodied *perfection*. You lived a *sinless* life, a life that I could never live.

You took my sin and that of the entire world, past, present and future into Your vessel and it *shattered* You, Jesus.

“That the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread and when He had given thanks: He brake it and said, Take, eat: this is my body which is broken for you”
1 Corinthians 11:23 (KJV)

For me, You were humiliated. For me, You were in agony. For me, You had to die. My sins *killed* You, Jesus.

“And being found in human form, He [Jesus, the Son] humbled himself by becoming obedient [to the Father] to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Phillipians 2:8 (ESV)

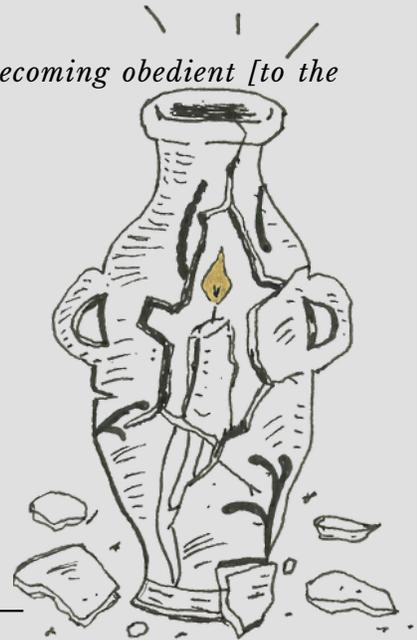
And now, like me, Your broken pieces were scattered on the ground.

Is there any hope for the dead?

But You did not stay on the ground!
No! You *rose* back to life!
You defeated death, once and for all!
O! What a remedy heaven has provided,
Christ Jesus, my *Redeemer*!

“Yes, my soul, find rest in God, my *hope* comes from Him.”
Your love for me is unconditional, unreserved, indescribable, indefinite—
Agape love.

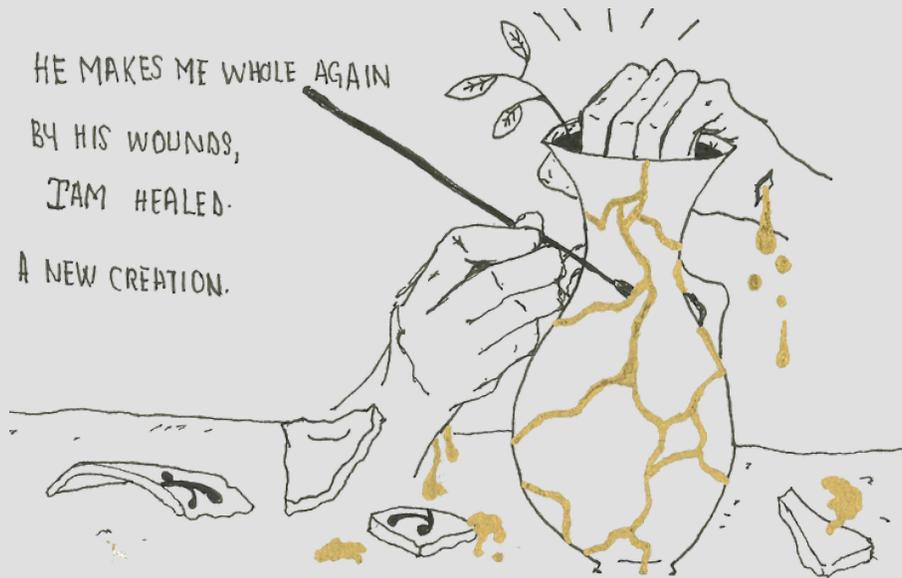
Once broken—You’ve made me whole. Once lifeless—You’ve given me life, *again*.



“For God who said, “Let the *light* shine out of darkness” made His *Light* shine in our hearts to give us the *Light* of the knowledge of *God’s glory* displayed in the *face of Christ*. But we have this *treasure in jars of clay* to show that this all surpassing power is *from God* and *not from us*.”
2 Corinthians 4:6-7 (ESV)

From the dust of the ground, now again I stand upright.
A jar of clay—*imperfect*, and yet, still filled and glazed with Your *Light*.

“It is finished.”-Christ Jesus



What do you mean "I died?"

"You may surely eat of any tree in the garden; 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 2:16 (ESV)

After Adam and Eve had sinned, they did not physically die right away. However, at that moment—they did die spiritually. In Christianity, at its core, sin is rebellion against God, hence it separates us from Him who is the Creator and Sustainer of life. In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were in a perfect relationship with God—both their physical and spiritual bodies, in perfect health. When sin entered within them, it destroyed all of that. Because of sin, not only did their spirits immediately die, even their mortal bodies were now subjected to wear and tear which leads to eventual physical death. As descendants of Adam and Eve, we too [mankind] are now subjected to the same fate.

"For the wages of sin is death..."

If you take a fish out of water, it will die;
And when you uproot a tree from the soil in which it was planted, it will die.
Likewise, when mankind is separate from God, he dies.
"God is our natural environment."
We were created to live in His presence and to be connected to Him.
It is only in Him that life exists.
It is only in Him that our spirits can live, eternally.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 6: 23 (NIV)

God, Science, And Created Beings

Ruth Olujobi

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.”

Genesis 1:1-4, 26-27, 31 NIV

I’m sitting in my Biology class on the second day of the semester and while my professor introduced the class and all we’d be covering, he got to evolution and made a brief remark that alluded to creationism. “Some people say they don’t believe in evolution. Well, do they believe in an atom?”

Huh? Really? “Well, what a way to start off this class”, I thought.

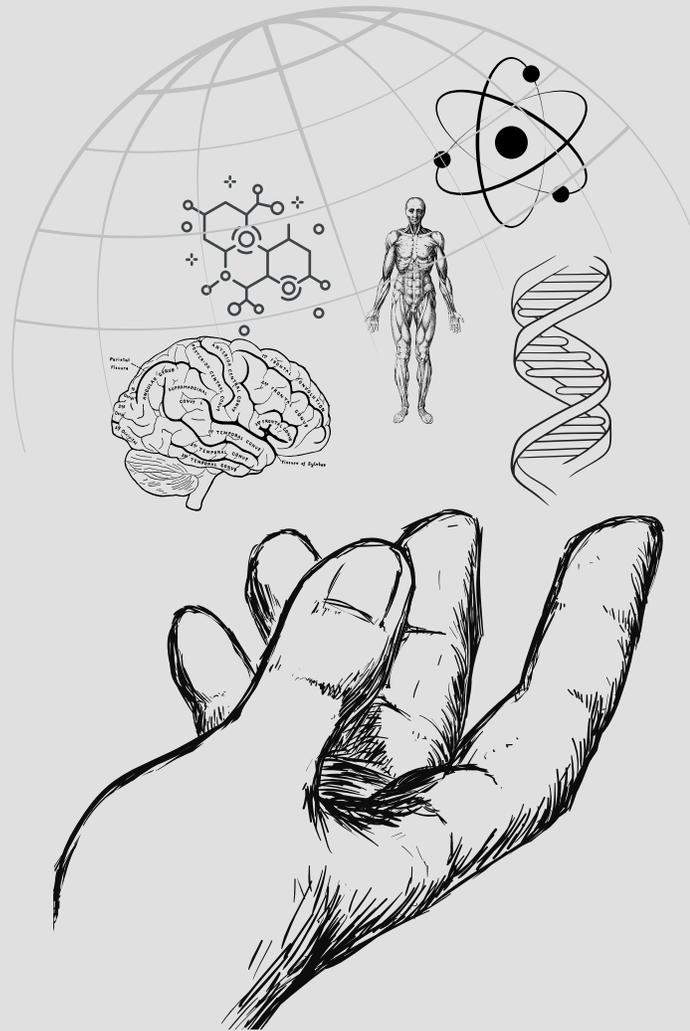
Since that remark, I haven’t stopped thinking about the intersection of creationism, God, and science. I was pretty sure there was a connecting thread, but finding all the ways it connected was where I hadn’t found a way to properly articulate.

In another class, we were discussing the intersection between “religion” and science in our world today. I’m emphasizing religion because I think when it’s mentioned in these kinds of classes, it’s not usually mentioned as a way of life, like how we Christians see it, but like some foreign concept that only ignorant people believe. Being in both classes in the same semester meant that I had to intentionally choose to stand firm on my Christian beliefs, regardless of our discussions in class, as well as reflect on how God has been teaching me to see his hands in science.

I grew up in a religious community where you were either a Christian or Muslim. To help you understand the depth, I could almost always tell a person's religion by their name. So, finding people who identified as not belonging under those two (umbrella) religious branches was certainly not common. As a result, I don't recall any time in my childhood where I had to "defend" creationism. Everyone in my closest circle kinda agreed on it, something like an unspoken rule. I recall conversations with my immediate older brother where he would tell me how he had these kinds of conversations with non-believers at his university. I knew that I would eventually have these conversations as I grew older, but I didn't know where or at what scale. Coming to Bowdoin's definitely meant that I would have to engage in these kinds of discussions in and out of class. It's been almost two years now and although I still have a lot to understand, I have learned so much about how our world is a masterpiece created by the greatest scientist Himself- GOD!

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). This verse stands at the beginning of the Bible – simple, direct, and powerful, and constantly resurfaces in a similar manner throughout the entire book. Isaiah 45:12 says "I made earth and created man on it"; Jeremiah 10:12 says "But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding"; and even Revelation, the last book of the Bible, says in the 11th verse of its fourth chapter "You are worthy, our Lord... for you created all things and by your will they were created and have their being". All these verses are a testament to the fact that God, the master scientist, created the world.

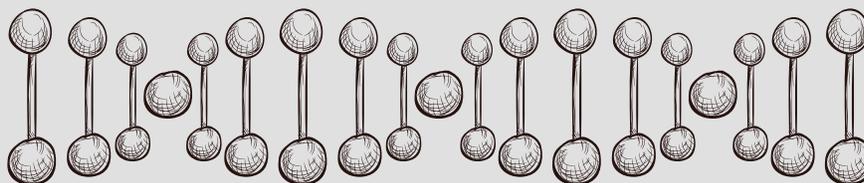
Sometimes I ask myself whether I believe this because I grew up believing it, but no, I believe this because I can feel God's presence all around me in nature, I see him when I look at the way the waves of the ocean move so powerfully, I hear him when I hear the melodious singing of the birds or the rhythmic movement of the branches on thousands of trees in a forest, I feel him when I feel the tingle on my skin from the warmth of the sun. I see him everywhere! The Bible succinctly captured this when it said "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20) With my academic interests in STEM, God has been helping me see how he himself is the "brain" behind that field. From the incredible details in a DNA strand to the sheer precision with which every cell, tissue, organ, and system in our bodies work, it almost feels too clear that there had to be an intentional design.



For me as a Christian, knowing that I was created, and did not just appear randomly, gives my life so much meaning. The Bible tells me that I am created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), I am “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14) and that I am “God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Even in the midst of extreme pain and agony, Job testified that “the Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). Isn’t it great to know that we were created with such care and attention, and not mass produced like some robots? This realization gives me a sense of purpose, a reminder that I was created by God to fulfill specific tasks here on earth. But I recognize that this entire concept of creation might just be too hard to grasp. We truly can not do this on our own, we need God’s help. The Bible tells us that “by faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3). Without this faith, we simply would struggle with understanding that there is a being, far bigger and majestic, that our human minds can simply comprehend. And how do we get this faith? – it “comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). This means that growing our faith means we’ll have to take active steps in reading and learning from God’s word.

There honestly is no better way to grow our faith except by going to the one who is the giver of all faith. And so, I know that I don’t have to choose one over the other, it’s not God or Science, God vs. Science, but God AND Science, as a sticker from a conference I attended earlier this year rightly put. I walk proudly in the acceptance that I am a created being, not an afterthought or a random appearance in the universe. I sit proudly in my labs, knowing that God is the greatest scientist of all times, and that I can come to him when I need help. I stand proudly in the midst of nature, basking in the fact that God created the trees, the birds, the ocean, the ants, the caterpillars, the sun, and everything we can and cannot see. God’s spirit takes expression in my life and I feel absolutely blessed to be made in his image. Have you accepted this reality and His place in your life yet?



A Confused But Hopeful
Believer In Christ

Catherine Cao

Father in heaven,

Letter 1

I'm back again, asking for strength and courage as you have commanded (Deuteronomy 31:6-8, NIV). I've been asked to write for Agathos, but I feel hesitant. While I believe in You and Your teachings, I'm certainly not knowledgeable enough to write a comprehensive article about my faith. However, I hope to use a few stream-of-consciousness letters to share my thoughts as a simple believer in your goodness.

Letter 2

Even in the most mundane daily activities such as stargazing at Farley Field, or paddling through Aziscohos Valley, I'm compelled to appreciate nature as all aspects of creation "sing for joy" (Psalms 96:11-13). And, to even think about creation's whole dependency upon your eminent character of transcendence shown through how you crafted what currently is from what was not (Hebrews 11:3), I'm undeniably learning to experience the breath of every living thing as universal, eternal proclamations to your glory (Job 12:7-10).

Besides marveling at these testimonies of your eternal power and divine nature (Romans 1:20), I take confidence from moments on the Appalachian Trails, looking at all the "birds of the air" and "lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:8-26). I might be a mere tiny mortal, but since in your words I'm "worth more than many sparrows" (Luke 12:7) whom you've provided for, I know that I'm in good hands because you sustain me and think about me so much more than I may comprehend (Psalms 139).

Letter 3

When I'm admiring nature as a recreational activity with no harrowing worries, it's easy to see goodness in all your creation (Genesis 1), but when I'm pulled back into "the real world," it can feel like a flipped side. Even in nature itself, there's a lot of cruelty.

I guess as I've began rereading the books of Genesis, Psalms, and Apostle Paul's writings on the nature of creation verse by verse, chapter after chapter every week, I'm starting to struggle with a question that many people grapple with: if You are sovereign and have created all things to be good, why does suffering exist in the world? Despite seeking answers from other Christians, I haven't found any satisfying explanations. My friends may not understand my confusion, and pastors give me abstract answers difficult to grasp. It's hard for me to come to terms through their reasoning.

Letter 4

I've been trying to summarize the arguments I heard from these confident Christians who had no trouble reconciling the confusing aspects of your world and order. They often quoted St. Augustine, a prominent figure in the Christian community, who argued:

- Suffering is self-inflicted because sin is self-damaging
- You inflicted suffering as a response to sin
- Suffering reveals both good and evil
- Through suffering, we can distinguish temporary from lasting goodness
- Suffering in You, just as Christ has suffered, perfects us
- Sometimes, You permit suffering to humble us and prevent worse consequences from pride

It's a lot to work with for my (not so big) Bowdoin brain, so I need time to think about it.

Letter 5

What I'm gathering is that suffering exists because of Adam and Eve's disobedience, despite knowing the consequences of death - both spiritual and physical (Genesis 2:15-17). But what does that have to do with everyone else who didn't get to make that decision and is now dragged along with it, literally the entirety of mankind and animals and plants? And what about the billions of people who've existed on this planet and have been dealing with the consequences of "sin [entering] the world through one man" (Romans 5:12)? Besides, I don't even want to dive into the free will and determinism debate surrounding Adam's creation and whether he would make the same choice if he could relive his life.

It's been a few months, and while these aspirations sound noble and heroic, I'm not sure if I can reconcile that with Your image as a loving and understanding God.

Letter 6

On this topic, a friend recently asked me about the definition of good and evil. Considering that you went great lengths to declare that what you created was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) with a particular emphasis on concluding day six on the goodness of all your creations (Genesis 1:31), I think it's important for me to take a step back in really considering the purpose of creation to understand the meaning of goodness in the biblical context. As a thought experiment, sometimes I've played with the idea that you created all things for the enjoyment of mankind. After all, as God you are self-sufficient and not in need of anything, and you've intentionally provided the conditions of the world to be filled with mankind as its inhabitants (Genesis 1:1-31). The end of creation would ultimately be the happiness of the creatures – us. However, in circling back to the original question, this fails to explain suffering. Besides, we exist because you are God, rather than vice-versa, so it would inherently be flawed to argue that you allowed creation to exist for the purpose of promoting creation itself. You're not dependent on us to be known, and your nature stands apart from creation.

On the flip side of that assertion would be – creation exists for your glorification. I don't believe in having to reason through every argument for it to be considered as a correct statement, because I know this one is based on the truth simply because it is substantiated by biblical scripture, such as in Isaiah 43:7.

I guess it's important to work with the premise that you are unchanging with an everlasting dominion (Psalm 145:13), and hence the goodness of your creation cannot be corrupted despite the introduction of sin. In your infinite wisdom and power, all that you've created has been and eternally continues to be good. So how do I come to an understanding of the goodness of your creation while recognizing the realities of conditions we face today?

Letter 7

Perhaps goodness in your scripture refers to the fulfillment of its purpose. Creation is good because it exists to glorify you – “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things” (Revelation 4:11). It's easy to see that the cosmos was created for your exultation, as the famous verse goes, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1). But it's also inspiring to be reminded that we have also been called for the same intention, “Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory” (Isaiah 43:7).

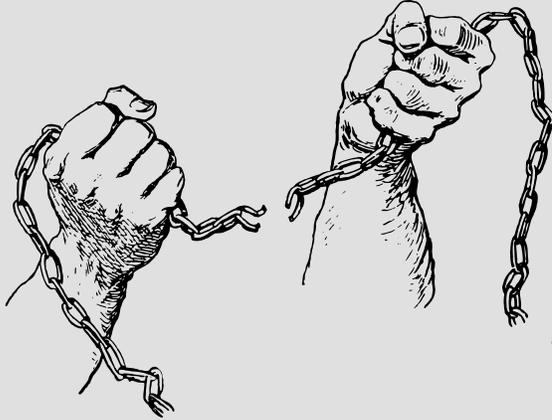
I find this encouraging. As God, you are not dependent on glory and creation for anything. Creation itself does not increase, but simply declares Your glory. Yet despite your complete independence and sovereignty from needing anything in your creation, you chose in your free will to create. And since the purpose of such creation is to reveal Your great wisdom and power, it is good.

Letter 8

I'm still trying to reach the epiphany moment of truly understanding what I wrote from my half-thoughts, but I'm confident that an earnest understanding will come to me one day.

In Jesus's name I pray, Amen.





Meditations:

The Sovereignty of God in Creation, Corruption, and Renewal Jackson Fenton

We live in a world of insurmountable barriers. We can never truly realize our ideals on our own. The evil of this world and in ourselves frustrates our attempts to be good. Our finitude defeats our attempts to achieve greatness. Our mortality thwarts our pursuit of love and satisfaction. Our souls crave more than the temporary pleasures of this life. Yet we never can attain what we seek by any effort we take. This corrupted world we live in is a dismal prospect. Is there any hope for a fallen man? This is the common cry of humanity.

“In six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day.”¹ All that God made was good, and nothing existed apart from Him. Among God’s creations were man and woman. The Lord created a garden as a dwelling place for the man and woman to cultivate and steward. In the middle of the garden God planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God gave the man and the woman freedom to eat any tree in the garden but this tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **And everything God made was good.**

All that God made was good. Everything existed through Him and for His glory. The man and the woman found satisfaction in each other and in their Maker. **And all that God made was good.** But the unadulterated goodness of the garden did not last. Both the man and the woman ate of the tree which God commanded them not to eat. The man and the woman were separated from God and condemned to death and to the Curse.² **And all the earth faced corruption.**

The man and woman who sinned, Adam and Eve, are our ancestors. Their world is our world. Their sin is our sin. They rebelled against God. Their actions skewed the created order. So too do we rebel against God and live in conflict with His created order. We have inherited both the sin nature and the Curse, and are doomed to death and eternal separation from God.

Everything was created by God. Apart from Him nothing exists. **And all that God created was good.** God is sovereign over all his creation. Evil is not a realm independent of, and at odds with God. It is a deformity of the created order. Even Satan, the prince of rebels, is a fallen creation of God. A good apple may turn bad, but it is still the creation of the apple tree. God is not the author of evil, but He is sovereign over it. “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things.”³

¹ Ex. 20:11 NASB

² The Curse, in brief, is the direct consequences of the original sin of Adam and Eve on humanity and the creation. When God commands Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He says, “...for in the day that you eat from it **you will sure die.**” (Gen. 3:17 NASB) The Hebrew literally means “in dying you will die.” God was warning Adam of the death and corruption he and the rest of creation would face, even during life (i.e. while dying). The Curse was fully expressed to Eve, Adam, and the serpent. Their rebellion against God involved the entirety of creation in labor, pain, and enmity.

³ Is. 45: 6-7 ESV

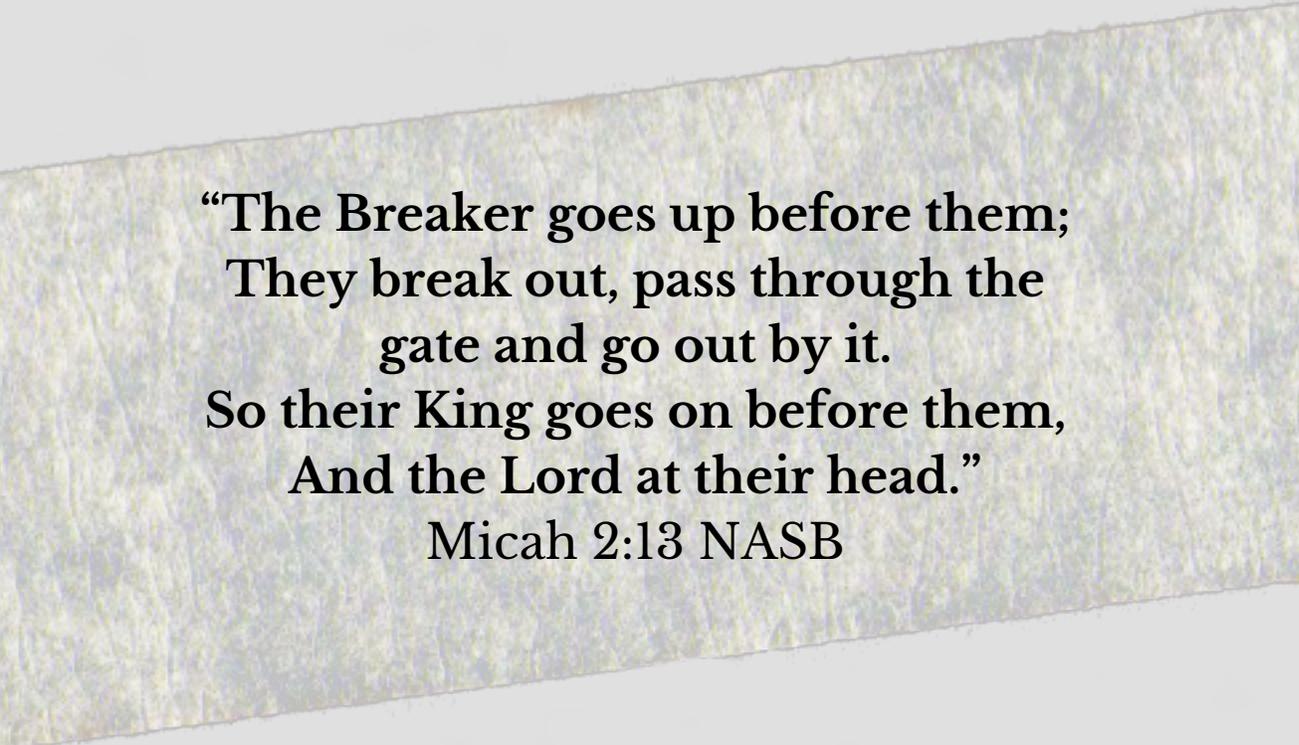
Nothing is beyond God's control. The evil God allows in the world is ultimately to showcase His glory. Beings created by God have rebelled against Him. All the rebellious—the entire race of humanity—face God's righteous wrath. The story does not end there though. In His great mercy and love God saw fit to “reconcile all things to Himself”⁴ through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. The greatest barriers we face to reveling in the good of God have been broken down by the blood and resurrection of Christ. He became a curse for us to lift the Curse from us.

This corrupted world seems so out of order. Any attempts by us to overcome the rifts and barriers between us and God's good creation order will fall short. We are only the created. We have no sovereignty over the evils of this world. But we have a Creator that loves us Who is sovereign over the good and the calamity of this world. He has sent His Son to be our champion. He has defeated death and breaks down the barriers that keep us from living in the good of God. We have indeed been reconciled to God through the love, sacrifice, and sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. “The **Breaker** goes up before them;

They break out, pass through the gate and go out by it.

So their King goes on before them,

And the Lord at their head.”⁵



**“The Breaker goes up before them;
They break out, pass through the
gate and go out by it.
So their King goes on before them,
And the Lord at their head.”
Micah 2:13 NASB**

⁴ Col. 1:20 NASB

⁵ Mic. 2:13 NASB



Whatever is Good: Goodness through God's Eyes

Daniel Kang

What are some of the things you find *good* in this life? When do you find it? Is it with the family you spend time with? Is it with your friends when you go hang out and get boba? Is it when you got an A on that math exam? Or is it when you have fun partying at the Spring Gala?

Well, what about the future? What does a good future look like?

Whatever those are, there are differences to what people see as “good”. According to Google, “good” is whatever is to be desired or approved of. And to an extent, that definition holds true. People determine what’s good according to whatever is desired or approved from their standards. We see that moments with family and friends give us happiness and joy, and we say that this is good. However, sometimes we seek things beyond that which give us just happiness: things that corrupt and defile yet satisfy us. And, still, we say that these are “good”. Are these two concepts of good synonymous?

In our current generation, there is a present yet overlooked distortion in man’s heart. It is that we seek things that are “good” according to us. The good that are fit according to us, according to our needs, according to our wants, according to our emotions, according to our opinions, according to our thoughts, and according to our heart. We pursue and seek things that provide satisfaction according to what we see as fit and as good. It is our hearts that we set as kings and gods as we command our lives according to the hunger of our hearts. However, reader, I want to let you know that the heart can be misleading, depending on where you set your heart on.

God has placed eternity in man’s heart. It says in Ecclesiastes 3:11:

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity in man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:11 ESV)

This explains the constant hunger, the constant seeking, and the constant struggle to find things that are “good” to us. This, however, does not mean that we are to satisfy our hearts with things that are “good” to us. If God has put eternity into our hearts, it is for us to obtain that eternity through God alone.

The Character of God

You may ask, “Then, who is this God?” Our God is a God with many names.

Yahweh.

Jehovah.

Elohim.

El Shaddai.

Adonai.

Jesus.

Just to name a few.

And do you know, reader, that our God is the only God who speaks? That’s right, a God who speaks.

As God creates the world in Genesis 1, the constant phrase “and God said” occurs and is repeated after each day He creates something new and awesome. Not only does He speak the world into existence, but He also speaks to His people. When Moses is confronted by God and as he asks how he should present God to the Egyptians, God replies by speaking to Moses:

“I AM WHO I AM.” (Exodus 3:14 ESV)

And it is here where the first characteristic of God is shown: He is an *everlasting* God.

By saying to Moses, that He is “I AM WHO I AM”, it speaks of God’s eternal existence and eternal nature. Nobody created God nor was there anything before God. God is God, and He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He was God, is God, and will be God. From the beginning of time, to now, and for eternity, He is the same God. The prophet Isaiah also speaks of God’s eternal nature, as Isaiah says:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.” (Isaiah 40:28 ESV)

Our God is a God that does not grow tired, nor weary. He doesn’t get exhausted like we do when we study for our exams and are bombarded with work. He doesn’t get annoyed like we do whenever we get annoyed with people or our siblings. He doesn’t get tired like we do when we get tired of our daily responsibilities. He is a God that is eternal, a God who is not dependent to time or to any limitations. His thoughts and wisdom are far superior to anything of this world, higher than our thoughts and our wisdom. His ways are a mystery to us because our finite minds cannot understand the majesty of His wisdom and power. He is *absolute* and *infinite*. His thoughts and ways are incomparable to this world.

He is also a *good* and *creating* God. Good in the sense that everything that He is, everything that He does, and everything that He thinks is good. Why? Because He is God. He is the Great I AM. Because only Him is He perfect and absolute because of His nature of being God. Going back to Genesis 1, another phrase that is repeated throughout the chapter is, “And God saw that it was good”. Since it is God who is creating according to His absolute and perfect will, everything He touches and makes is declared “good” by His authority and character. Our God is a God who speaks and creates at the same time. It is through the Word of God that everything is formed. When God speaks, mountains shake and seas roar, and reality, which is “good” to Him, is created. Isaiah speaks of God’s creation order as it says:

“Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it:” (Isaiah 42:5 ESV)

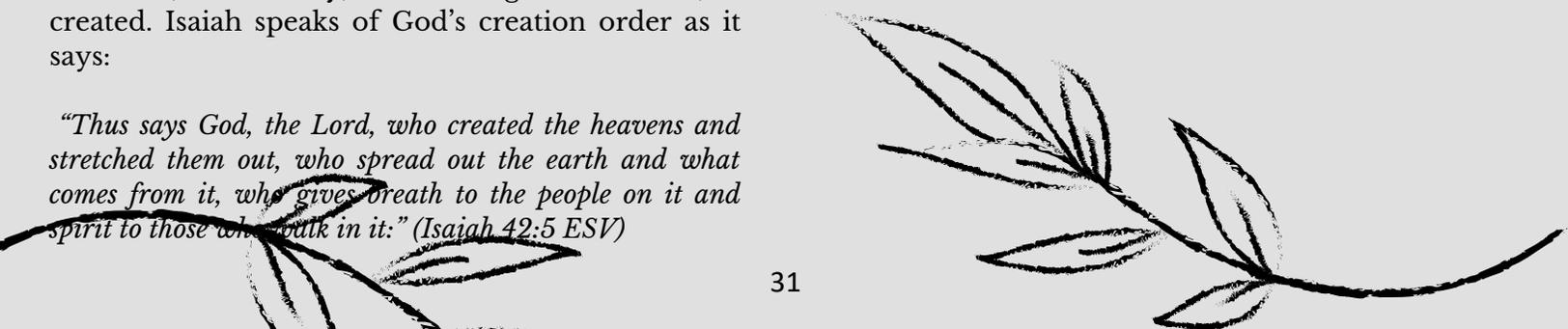
God creates, shapes, stretches, spreads, molds, lengthens, measures, pulls, pushes, and declares reality to exist, to perform, and to be. All with His Word. And God doesn’t make light, the waters, the heavens, the Earth, the seas, the fruits and vegetation, the sun and the moon and the stars, the creatures below and the creatures above the waters, and man in one instant. On the contrary, God takes 6 days to create all these things. In the process, God creates the concept of time. It is through all these beautiful things that He has created from His absoluteness and perfection that God declares them “good”. For through His goodness and creation, God had laid out a design, and from that design an intent, and from that intent, morality.

With all these qualities, then, our God being everlasting, absolute, infinite, perfect, creating, and good, is where we arrive to an important characteristic of God: that He is holy. Holiness is whatever is *set apart* from this finite world. Our God being absolute and good, overflowing with goodness and love, is set apart from us humans and from this world as everything in this world has a limit. But our God being a limitless God is truly holy, and nothing in this world can be compared to Him. For with His holy thoughts and wisdom, man cannot perceive how vast are His thoughts and splendor. However, we can, and perhaps only can, truly be in awe of the way, the truth, and the life.

“Good” in the Eyes of Man: The Issue with Sin

You might then say, “Well, how come if God is so holy and so perfect, evil exists in this world? God could eradicate evil with a snap of his fingers, so why doesn’t he?”

To answer the latter question, God *could* eradicate evil with a snap of his fingers, and He has willed to destroy evil through Christ and Christ alone. To answer the prior question, chapter 3 of Genesis must be examined.



After God creates everything that we currently see to this day, He creates Man on the 6th day. Here, He creates Man with a different design compared to everything else. Isaiah speaks of this as well, shown in the prior passage of Isaiah 42:5, that God had put His spirit in Man, His very own breath into Man. Through this, Man comes to life, or perhaps specifically Man's spirit is created to be alive as it responds to God's glory and creation. Through this process, Man is created in God's image, bearing the likeness and spirit of God, as well as other characteristics such as how Man can be good, caring, loving, intelligent, creative, and more. And God designs Man and Woman, Adam and Eve, to be good in their nakedness – good in the sense that Man and Woman can honor one another and worship God together in their distinct beauties and differences that they consist of and share.

This perfect relationship, this perfect nature is broken once Adam and Eve fall into temptation to the Serpent's lies. Enticed with the opportunity to be like God, the Eve is asked by the Serpent,

“—did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”

“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”
(Genesis 3:4,7 ESV)

“Did God *actually* say”, is what the Serpent had asked, questioning God's authority and perfect nature. In reality, the Devil can't do much against us except to convince us to lie to our minds that evil is good. Sin can be defined as missing the mark. It can be more thoroughly explained by labeling sin as disobedience to God's perspective of good. Whatever is distorted from its original good, whatever is twisted from its original design, whatever is misaligned from its original intent – these things are perceived as sin. Knowing this, the Serpent twists and distorts God's words and His authority, confusing and misguiding Eve to desire something “*better*” than God's goodness: that was to become *like* God, knowing all good and all evil. This is what tempts Eve, then Adam. A little after, it says,

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:6 ESV)

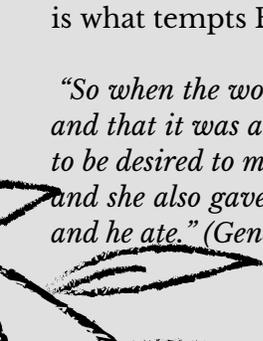
Here, the outline of sin's epidemic is shown: First, there comes a false delight to the eyes and mind; then a false desire in the heart; then the action of disobedience; and finally, the spread of sin. Almost like a virus, right? This is the scary thing about sin. It doesn't stay within one person's life. It doesn't stay hidden. It always spreads and infects the people around you. Like a cancer, it distorts and weakens what was originally healthy and good.

In reality, Adam and Eve did not become like God, but they became less like God. They drew farther away from God, as the consequences of their sin came to fruit in the form of shame, embarrassment, and abandonment. Adam and Eve realized that they were naked and sewed fig clothes of loincloth to hide their bodies. Then they hid from God. They ran away. Genesis 3:8 says,

“And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.” (Genesis 3:8 ESV)

What once was perfect between Man and God, what was once holy and pure is now broken from one act of sin. This the power and deadliness of sin. It removes you from God's presence, His holiness, and goodness. Adam and Eve cannot return to their loving Creator like they could before. Later, we see that Adam and Eve are made to leave the Garden of Eden, because God and sin cannot coexist together. That is how holy and good God is, and that is how deadly and powerful sin is. All because they wanted to become like God, a rebellion against God's perfect design for man and woman.

The issue with sin is this: Whatever we seek, whatever we try to find to satisfy us, whether that be with people, with money, with status, with power, or with control, these things have all been distorted or used to become distorted as man's heart has fallen short from God's original design and purpose for man.



Why God's Goodness and Not Mine?

Ever since the beginning with Adam and Eve, there has always been a central fight within man: and that is the question of authority. Adam and Eve desired to be like God, if not better than God, and took the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. The Serpent, perhaps, also wanted to be like God, controlling and manipulating as it was able to deceive Adam and Eve to turn their backs against the authority of God. It even says in Isaiah 14:12-17 of Lucifer's heart to be exalted higher than God:

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations!

*For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High.'" (Isaiah 14:12-14 NKJV)*

Reader, we must realize that we are finite and not God. We can never be God nor have the capacity nor the ability nor the wisdom to be God. There is a famous movie that I'm reminded of, which is "Bruce Almighty." It depicts a regular guy named Bruce, who is given the task and powers of God. Though he enjoys having everything happen according to his way, satisfying his wants and desires, it concludes with him abandoning that responsibility to God Himself because of how weak, how finite, how inferior, and how powerless he is compared to God. This is because God created humans to be humans. Though we are finite, we are created to praise His name and glorify Him. To give thanks and to bless His name for all that He has done, is doing, and will do.

You might say then, "Well that's unfair!" But I encourage you, reader, to experience a life without God and a life with God. Go out and seek all the things that satisfy you. Go out and be apart from God for a while and see if it fulfills you or if it completes you. Spoiler alert, it doesn't – many books, many prophets, many people, and many witnesses of God's goodness can attest to this fact. Isaiah 40:6-8 says:

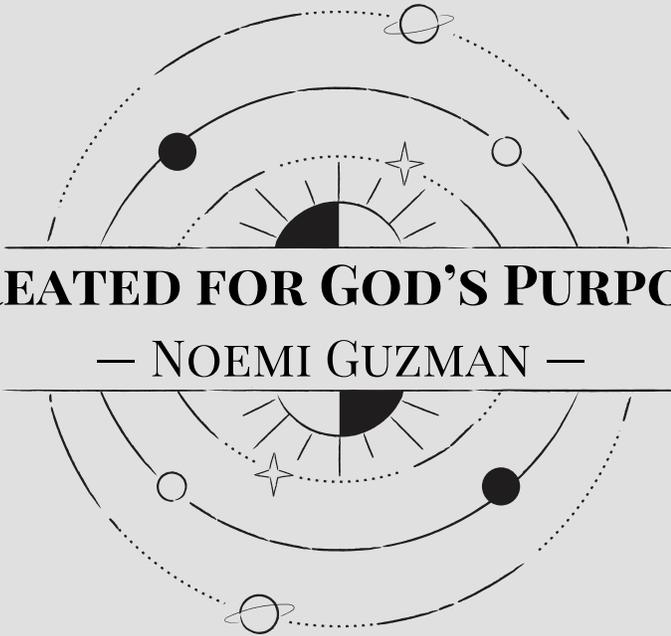
"A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:6-8 ESV)

All things on this Earth have a limit. In the end, all will fade away, all will end, and all will fail us. That's why our only sense of security and dependency should be on God, as God's love and goodness is eternal. The only eternity found in this world is through Christ alone. You may say, then how come God allows evil in this world? And to be honest, I don't know the exact answer nor the specific reason. Because I'm not God. And knowing that I am not God and knowing that God is God, is enough to give me peace as I acknowledge, know, and trust that my God is my God, He will take care of it. Because He is Good.

So, I encourage you, reader, to live a life with God. Pursue God and His goodness, as His love and goodness are abundant and like living water, overflowing and overwhelming your soul. In His goodness, you will find true peace, restoration, fullness, love, and the ultimate truth – that God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is Good.

*"You have dealt well with your servant, O Lord,
according to your word.
Teach me good judgement and knowledge, for I believe in
your commandments.
Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your
word.
You are good and do good; teach me your statutes.
The insolent smear me with lies, but with my whole heart
I keep your precepts;"
Psalms 119:65-69*





CREATED FOR GOD'S PURPOSE

— NOEMI GUZMAN —

Through the use of a method called asteroseismology, scientists are able to observe certain patterns of sound that come from stars to reveal the inner workings of stars, such as “what stars are made of, how old they are, [and] how big they are” (Elizabeth Landau, NASA). As far-fetched as it may seem, the ancient psalmist said something similar. In Psalm 19:1-4, David says that indeed the stars in the heavens tell of the glory of God. They speak of something undoubted for the whole Earth: God is the Creator and creation is the extraordinary artistic work of His hands.

When God created the universe and everything in it, He did it for a purpose. In fact, every aspect of creation has a purpose: to glorify God and reveal His power. As human beings, we were created to glorify God and live in a loving relationship with him.

CREATION DECLARES GOD'S GLORY

Few people have seen the glory of God as Moses saw it in Exodus 12:33-23. Furthermore, few would say that their conversion experience included a “light from heaven” and a voice from heaven as Saul experienced on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19 NIV). But everyone on Earth has seen the glory of God as described by David in Psalm 19. Clearly, yet wordlessly, from the stars to the sun, all creation declares the glory of God.

As we read the first four verses of Psalm 19, we find an important message: the heavens have something important to teach us. This makes sense because there is a Creator who made the heavens and He uses creation to reveal things about Himself to us. The fact is that God has communicated with us without using words, through His creation. He wants us to know about his glory.

While nature tells us about the greatness and glory of God, scripture instructs us how to live for Him in this fallen world. Beginning with verse 7 of Psalm 19, David speaks of "The law of the LORD", which contains His precepts, His commandments and His decrees (v. 7,8). All of these terms refer to God's communication with humanity. Like the heavens, they tell us something about our Creator; they are a revelation of His glory by communicating His will to us. The written revelation of God in His Law is of incalculable value (v.10) because it shows us the sin in our lives and everything that is foreign to the glory or perfection of God (Romans 3:23).

CREATED TO LOVE GOD

God loves us and wants a relationship with us. Thus, the purpose of our life is to know him, love him and serve him. By walking in the garden of Eden and calling Adam and Eve, as recorded in Genesis 3, we perceive that He had visited them personally. Likewise, He longs to have a close relationship with us today, but sometimes we also "hide" from Him, just like Adam and Eve did after sinning.

Micah 6:8 helps us understand why God created us: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God". What the Lord wants is to have communion with human beings; He wants our desire to obey his commandments, reject sin, and wants to strengthen a heart that seeks Him. This is the foundation of our purpose as His creation. He wants our obedience and all that it implies instead of ritual sacrifices. And by keeping his commandments we are therefore called to love Him: "If you love me, keep my commands" (John 14:15).

When we consider God's work in creation, both scripture and the love shown by Christ on the cross, we see an example to follow: we must respond with unconditional love and obedience to God.

In fact, Jesus himself identifies the greatest commandment as "Lov[ing] the Lord your God with all your heart", followed second by "Lov[ing] your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12: 30,31). In essence, God wants us to love Him, and if we truly love Him we'll keep His commandments, such as loving our neighbor.

CREATED TO RECOGNIZE AND WORSHIP GOD

In Romans we find that every human being is responsible for recognizing this revelation. Creation is itself a revelation from God.

God has revealed himself to humanity throughout the centuries — through creation, through scripture, and through His son Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul calls our attention to creation, that first revelation of God, in Romans 1. Humanity has an innate knowledge of God "since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (Romans 1:19). Furthermore, the Creator has used visible creation to make known of His invisible attributes. As a result, people can observe these realities and, therefore, we are found "without excuse" for not recognizing, and consequently not worshiping, God (Romans 1:20).

Because we have the ability of recognizing the reality, power, and glory of God through His creation, we are responsible for recognizing and worshiping Him. Every human being has free will to decide for themselves if they will accept or reject that revelation that God gives in creation. Thus we should stay away from sin, for it can "fool" and "darken" our hearts leading to a rejection of Christ (Romans 1:20).

CONCLUSIONS

God created us for His purpose. Through scripture, He reminds us that we are His creation, as Isaiah said in his time: "This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the Lord, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself" (Isaiah 44:24). Toils of life, especially as young people in college, make it easy to lose track of God's purpose for us and instead just follow through the motions of life. However, it is reassuring to know that our Father knew this would be a struggle for us. He displays His glory through creation, making it easy for us to not forget we should live the purposeful lives that God has intended for us: a life that intentionally seeks Him and makes sure Christ is in the center of it all.

Patrick Kingston

FATHERS

Reading the Bible with Church Fathers

One thing I love about my faith is that it's old. Like, we base our calendar on how old it is. Let's not downplay that. We tell time based on Christianity. Of course, we know that it was probably an incorrect calculation, plus or minus a few years, but the point still remains. It was around before the internet, telephone, the printing press, and even the book. Point being that Christianity is really old. Another beautiful thing about Christianity is that all along the way, from the beginning of Christianity to now, we have writings from Christians.

From Christianity's genesis, we hear from Jesus in the Gospels. Within the very first generation of Christians, we hear from Paul, Peter, and some John in the rest of the New Testament. And then 2000 years later we hear from our pastor/preacher at church and from other people at bible studies. While we can always lean on our seniors to have studied well at seminary and throughout life, personally I think we're skipping several thousand years.

Christianity didn't come out of thin air. There were people that, by the grace of God, were able to determine what was in the New Testament and what didn't belong there. There were people who had to valiantly defend the faith from heresies to maintain the faith that we have been gifted. Christians before us have lived through every era of history since Christianity and have protected, developed, and spread the faith throughout the world all the way to you and me here at Bowdoin College.

These people are known collectively as the Church Fathers. It's a loose grouping that stretches from the first century with people like St. Polycarp of Smyrna and, for the purposes of this writing, goes to the 8th century second council of Nicea. It's a bit of a misnomer as our Church Mothers are just as vital, but we'll be sticking with the term Church Fathers as when you're researching later it's the term you'll come across.

Some, like Polycarp, are venerated as Saints in modern liturgical churches and others like Origen were highly influential, but ultimately not saints. Within the Church Fathers lie differences in opinions, theology, physics, and more. The Fathers existed in an era when Christians were still figuring things out, so no one father is going to have everything correct. But, if you are a Christian today, it is thanks to the "Consensus Patrum," or Consensus of the Fathers, that we have correct doctrines preserved like the trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, Christ's future coming.

So if these guys are so cool, where should I start? How do I even read them? Well, I would like to endeavor to give you the tools you need as a Christian to be able to read the Church Fathers with confidence. We'll first look at geographical, linguistic, historical, political, and religious context and how these things impact things the Fathers might write. We'll then look at Genesis 1 with St. Basil's Hexaemeron as an example of reading the Fathers with discernment. I'll finally wrap things up with some examples of what to read next.

CONTEXT

The church Fathers were the filtering mechanism by which Christianity reached our modern day. They played a crucial role in shaping and transmitting christianity to the modern day. Living long ago and closer to the time of the writing of the Bible, it makes sense that they would have a strong grasp of the scriptures. Just as we need to understand the social, political, and theological context surrounding the writing and transmission of the New Testament in order to better understand it, we also need to understand the context that the Fathers lived in. It's infeasible to give a comprehensive history of the 800 years from Christ to II Nicea, so I'll be focusing on 0 AD through 400 AD. These years are important in particular because it's the time period in which Christ lived, in which the New Testament was written, and the period in which the earliest Fathers wrote. You can of course go on to explore the Byzantine and Western Roman church, the early medieval era, and so on, but I tend to find the earliest fathers to be the most interesting, so 0 AD through 400 AD is the boundary I'll set.

In order to contextualize the Fathers, I'll be focusing on 5 different disciplines: Geographical, Linguistic, Political, Historical, and Philosophical. The various contextual factors that impacted the Fathers were not independent, of course, and they were highly intertwined and interdependent. I'll also spend some time pointing out the differences in viewpoint from the Fathers to now. The Fathers were ancient people with ancient ideas. They were not modern people who just so happened to live thousands of years ago. This does not mean that they were dumb, just that they had a radically different understanding of the world. These differences will be discussed in the Philosophical section.

GEOGRAPHY

The geographical context will be the foundation of our understanding of things. We need a map, and luckily you (probably) carry one with you all the time. I'll be borrowing from the contemporary Orthodox Christian writer Frederica Matthewes-Green for this. Make a thumbs up with your left hand. Uncurl your fingers so that your hand is flat, thumb still up. Now make your palm face you. Now, make the point where your thumb and index finger connect point downwards to the floor. This is your map. It's not perfect, but it's got the right shape and should serve as a helpful visual aid.

The tip of your thumb is Rome, the tip of your index finger is Constantinople, the tip of your middle finger is Antioch, the tip of your ring finger is Jerusalem, and the tip of your Pinky is Alexandria. Rome is in modern day Italy, Constantinople is known as Istanbul and is in modern day Turkey, Antioch is in modern day Turkey (right by the border with Syria though), Jerusalem is in modern day Palestine/Israel, and Alexandria is in modern day Egypt.



These cities that cradle the Mediterranean sea were the centers of Christianity. Rome, Constantinople were centers of politics in the ancient world. Alexandria was a center of economics in the ancient world. Antioch was important to Christians as it was the center of Hellenistic Judaism and is where we were first called Christians. Jerusalem was important for obvious reasons. They formed a structure known as the Pentarchy which were the five Bishops in each of these 5 (pent) cities, which we'll discuss in more detail in the Political section.

Geography shapes everything, and in the ancient world even more so. It was hard for letters to reach from Constantinople to Rome, and even harder for people to travel from Constantinople to Rome. As such, each place developed ever so slightly differently, and people with geographical proximity likely had more ideological proximity. The eagle eyed among you may even be able to see how a schism between the four fingers and thumb would form later on all based on the geography. Geography even shapes how we remember people. Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Rome.

These place names are important, but just remember these important cities and you'll be set. Thumbs up, uncurl, palm facing you, point down and from the thumb Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria. Got it? Good.

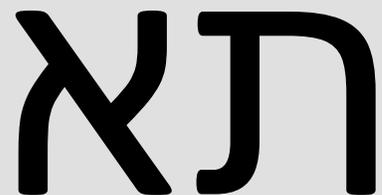
LINGUISTIC

There are a couple of languages that are of utmost importance in the development of Christianity. You don't have to know any of them to effectively study the fathers. Most of the writings of the fathers have excellent (although often slightly antiquated) translations into English, and those that don't are so obscure that by the time you reach them you've probably already got one or two of these under your belt.

The image shows two large, bold, black Greek letters: the letter Alpha (Α) on the left and the letter Omega (Ω) on the right. They are positioned to the left of the text describing the Greek language.

First up is Greek. The Greek language was the Lingua Franca, or the main language of trade, politics, and often general communication between people who speak different languages, of the ancient world. In a more modern example, imagine a Polish Businessman and a Japanese Businessman. Instead of one of them learning Polish and the other learning Japanese to conduct business, what's more likely is both of them learn English. In the ancient world, this was Greek. It was so important that the New Testament was written in Greek, several books in the Old testament (as recognized by Catholics and Orthodox) were written in Greek, and the vast majority of quotations of the Old Testament in the New were from a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures known as the Septuagint (or LXX). This one goes on your index finger in Constantinople.

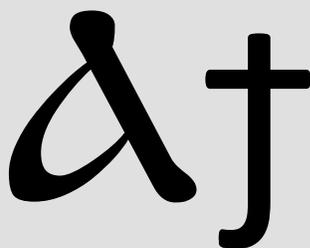
Next up is Hebrew. This one is important because the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. Hebrew was the language of God's chosen people Israel and continues to hold an importance to the modern day. It's an immensely important language in the Christian tradition because many of the earliest Christians were Jews who were trained to read the Torah in the original Hebrew from birth. This one goes on your ring finger in Jerusalem.

The image shows two large, bold, black Hebrew letters: the letter Tet (ת) on the left and the letter Aleph (א) on the right. They are positioned to the right of the text describing the Hebrew language.



Next is Aramaic of which Syriac is a dialect. Aramaic was the “walking around” language of Jews in Jerusalem around the time of Jesus. It is language that people think Jesus and the Apostles would have walked around speaking and this even appears when Jesus says things like “Abba” which is Father in Aramaic. Aramaic also shows up in the Old Testament where portions of Daniel and Ezra are in Aramaic. While it also goes on your ring finger, for mnemonic purposes, this one goes on your middle finger in Antioch.

Next is Latin. Latin was also a language of great importance. It would go on to supplant Greek as the lingua franca, and often the two are put together as the lingua franca(s) of the ancient world. It holds an important place in the preservation of many of the writings of the Fathers in that many of them aren’t preserved in their original tongue. It is thanks to the Latin speaking Christians and the preservation of the Catholic Church that we have many of the writings of the Fathers. This one goes on your thumb in Rome.



Last, but certainly not least is Coptic. Coptic was the everyday language of Egypt. It is an incredibly important language also because of preservation. Many works we know as “Apocryphal” like 1 Enoch and some that we know as “Heretical” like the Gospel according to Thomas are preserved only in their Coptic forms. This one goes on your pinky in Alexandria.

Linguistics is also important because of translation. Translation is interpretation. So, whenever we’re reading someone like St. Basil for example, we have multiple things going on. We’re reading, in English, texts written in Greek by a man who was reading texts in Greek, some of which are translations of texts written in Hebrew. So in just one Church father we have Hebrew, to Greek, to English. In some of them we have Hebrew, to Greek, to Latin, to English. Each step of this translation involves interpretive work. This interpretation colors how we ought to read the Fathers and it is something to keep in mind when reading any ancient text.

To remember these, just associate them with their city. Thumb-Rome-Latin, Pointer-Constantinople-Greek, Middle-Antioch-Aramaic/Syriac, Ring-Jerusalem-Hebrew, Pinky-Alexandria-Coptic.

POLITICAL

Whenever I say Political context, I don’t mean civil politics. I mean Ecclesial politics, church politics. Christians have been organizing ourselves from the very beginning. At the most basic, the first form of Christian organization was a group of people gathering around Jesus. In Acts we see the church develop into house churches and have hierarchies centered around the apostles. In later Christian writings we see deacons, and presbyters/episcopos (interchangeable at the time) develop into what we know today as the Monarchical Episcopacy.

By the end of the second century, the Church was fully organized as a hierarchical structure of clergy. It was a universal development across all of Christianity.

The Monarchical Episcopacy is a model of church governance with a Bishop serving as something of a monarch within their jurisdiction. Bishops and Bishops only had the power to ordain new priests and bishops and they only had this authority within their jurisdiction. Bishops were where the buck stopped, so to speak, in all matters relating to Christianity within his jurisdiction. As the church grew larger, certain bishops became more powerful. The five most powerful Bishops were the bishops of, you guessed it, Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. One important thing these bishops did was gather together in what we know as Eccumenical Councils. These were councils that were convened in order to respond to a heresy and to discipline the offending bishops.

The early church would not go out hunting heretics down. When a new theological idea that challenged pre-existing theological ideas popped up, the early church discussed the ideas and only after they determined what was right and wrong would they discipline offending bishops. The first proper Eccumenical council, I Nicea, was called in order to respond to the Heresy of Arianism. And in fact, Arius was accepted back into the church after he repented from this heresy.

Another important part of Church politics were the monks and nuns. Monastics were Christians who would seclude themselves either in Monasteries (multiple monks) or Hermitages (Just one, or maybe two monks) in order to devote their lives entirely to prayer. Oftentimes Fathers would start off as monks and then become priests and bishops later in life.

Monks were also troublemakers for the church hierarchy. Due to their isolation, monks were often the source of some of the heretical ideas. On the other side, monks were often bastions of Orthodoxy and the only ones preserving and understanding important doctrines.

The final piece of ecclesial politics is the laity, AKA the common people, AKA you and me. The laity are the ultimate deciders of the faith. If most Christians hadn't accepted an idea it wasn't accepted as official doctrine of the church. An important example of this is the Canon of Scripture. The Canon of Scripture, or the list of books that we have in our bibles, was not forced down our throats by church hierarchy as many conspiracy theorists will claim. Rather, it was a reflection of what Christians everywhere, by the grace of God, recognized as valuable to use. Rogue bishops couldn't just toss in or take away a book.

The important takeaway here is the monarchical episcopacy. Remember in our 5 cities that there were very important bishops there. These bishops (episcopos in Greek) were the highest authority (the monarchs) of Christian life in their diocese. Monks were secluded people who dedicated their lives to prayer and often butt heads with the bishops. The laity are the common people and are the final arbiter of the decisions of bishops. The structure is supposed to be bottom-up—keyword, supposed to be. Humans aren't perfect. The Patriarchs exist to make the lives of Bishops easier, the Bishops exist to make the lives of Priests easier, and the Priests exist to serve the laity.



HISTORICAL

We could spend thousands of pages on historical context, but we shouldn't. Here are a couple of relevant beats.

- 0 AD, Christ is born. He was born into the Roman Empire which stretched across the Mediterranean from Jerusalem to Spain.
- 33 AD, Christ is crucified. 'Nuff said.
- 70 AD, the Second Temple falls. The fall of the second temple was when the Romans reclaimed the Second Temple in Jerusalem. The period of Judaism that is most important to early Christianity was the Judaism of this period known as "Second Temple Judaism."
- 90 AD, the New Testament has finished being written with the writing of the book of Revelation.
- 161-305 AD, Persecution of Christians. Christians were outwardly hated and persecuted for most of its earliest days because of (at the time) very transgressive ideas. Marcus Aurelius, Diocletian, and Decius are important emperors in the history of Christian Persecution.
- 313 AD, with the Edict of Milan, Emperor Constantine names Christianity as the official Religion of the Roman empire.

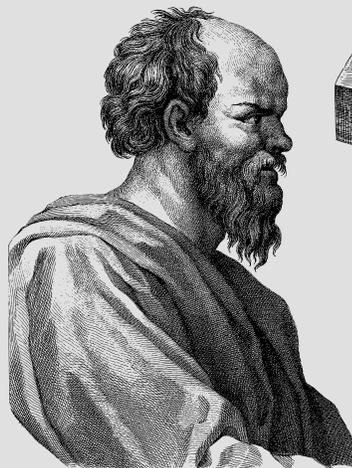
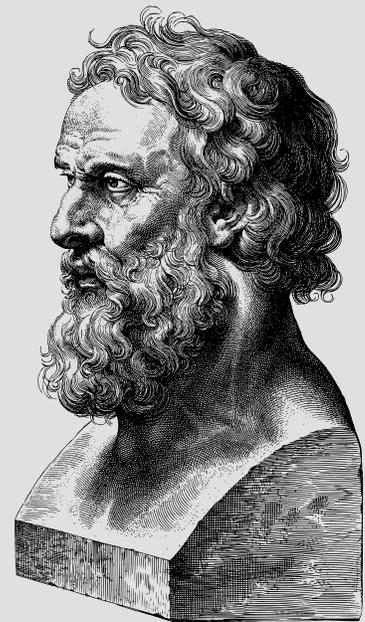
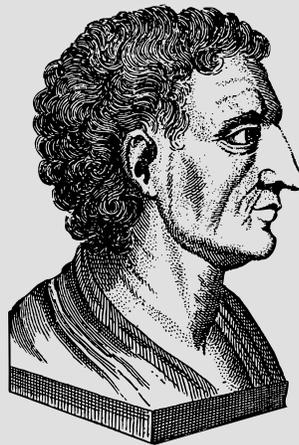
There are more important historical beats, to be sure, but the most important ones relevant to your understanding of the Church fathers are those.

An important takeaway from reading the fathers is the position of power a given father held at a particular time. Some Church Fathers like Polycarp were persecuted and later martyred for their faith. Others knew the Emperor and held great political influence. Keep their position in mind when reading them.

PHILOSOPHICAL

The final piece of context that one needs to understand the Church Fathers existed in a context with other religions and philosophies. Of course, in the ancient world, your philosophical worldview and your religious worldview were intertwined and inseparable. The Religious was also inseparable from the Civic because while someone might be a Stoic, if they didn't sacrifice to Zeus and worship the Emperor they might be seen as politically subversive and criminals.

The early fathers wrote in a world that was heavily influenced by the Greek Philosophers. Whenever we think of Greek Philosophy, we think of Plato and Aristotle. We'll get to them, but it's important to remember that Plato and Aristotle are victims of survivorship bias. There were many other philosophies that people followed and many fathers wrote directly against specific philosophical schools.



As St. Basil puts in his Address to the Young Men Concerning Greek Philosophy, studying philosophy is like looking at the sun through a reflection of a puddle before gazing at the fullness of light that is Christianity. People at this time were educated using Greek philosophy, so Greek philosophy was incredibly important to the Fathers. Stoicism, Cynicism, and Platonism and Aristotelianism in particular were incredibly important for the Fathers. The Fathers may come at their writing with a rejection of Greek Philosophy or by rejecting Greek Philosophy, but either way they were incredibly aware of the Greek Philosophical ideas. As a quick background, we can focus on the basic ideas of Platonism and Aristotelianism in comparison to modern Physics, or the philosophy of the material world.

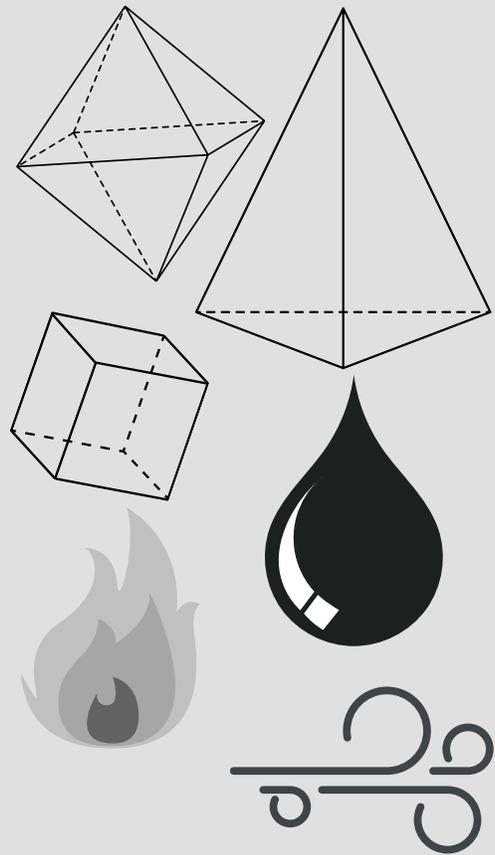
Platonic physics held that there was some perfect realm of forms. Forms were idealized versions of things and physical objects were imperfect shadows of these forms. Pursuit of knowledge involves the discovery and searching for these forms. As such, pursuit of human perfection involved moving towards understanding ideal forms and attaining a sort of gnosis. Human perfection was more of a spiritual or philosophical one than physical.

Aristotelian physics held that we can study the world through empirical investigation and that we don't need to reduce to non-physical forms. That said, things have natures or essences that are a part of their physical form. The nature of something informed the physical properties and behaviors of it. Why is glass clear? Because it is in the nature of glass to be clear. The pursuit of human perfection involves living more and more in accordance with human nature. We are to cultivate virtues in accordance with our nature.

Modern physics holds a quantitative emphasis over the qualitative natures and forms described before. It holds that everything is material and provides universal laws over nature or form-specific laws about behavior. Glass is glass due to the universal and quantifiable refraction of light, not because of its specific qualitative nature or form. Ideal functions are imposed on objects by minds. If the ideal for humans is to die, then a functional heart is one that does not pump blood. If the ideal for humans is to live, then a functional heart is one that pumps blood. The same goes for humans. The ideal of a human is imposed upon humans by minds and not inherent. This can be some individual mind's idea of some ideal life, or God's mind imposing some perfect ideal on humans.

These worldviews are not compatible. The Fathers understood the world in mostly the Platonic and Aristotelian ways and trying to come at them with a modern understanding is bound to lead to misunderstandings.

In short, the ancient worldview is incompatible with our modern worldview. They emphasized qualitative things, we emphasize quantitative things. Plato cared about ideal forms and contemplating those forms. Aristotle cared about concrete natures and acting virtuously in accordance with those natures.



SUMMARY

In as brief as possible: The Fathers were ancient people with an ancient context that must be understood. Geographically, there were 5 important centers of Christianity. Thumbs up, uncurl, palm forward, point down and from the thumb Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. There were several important languages that were translated between both then and now that include Latin, Greek, Aramaic/Syriac, Hebrew, and Coptic. The 5 cities had the 5 most important/influential bishops and they were the monarchs of their districts, monks matter too and the structure is supposed to exist to serve the laity. Historically just remember Jesus, then persecution, then Constantine. Philosophically just remember that our worldview is radically different then theirs, that Plato cared about forms, and Aristotle about natures.

Let's see this knowledge in action.

GENESIS 1 WITH ST. BASIL

One of my favorite pieces of Patristic literature is St. Basil the Great's Hexaemeron. Hexaemeron means six days in Greek and it's a series of 9 homilies on the six days of creation by St. Basil. It does a good job of going verse by verse, and I don't want to reproduce the whole thing in quotations, so I'll be taking a few key sections and demonstrating how Basil's context is important and what we can take away from them.

Before we do this, let's contextualize Basil. Basil was a Bishop of Caesarea and lived from the years 330-380.

So from this we immediately know that Basil held a position of great power within the church. He's called a saint, so we know that he was never formally condemned for any heresies (although this does not exclude him from holding any heretical opinions). We know that he lived after the edict of Milan, so his persecution, if any, was likely not from the emperor. Basil wrote in Greek and it was after the fall of Rome, so Constantinople was probably the most relevant city and Bishop for him.

From Homily 4, Section 5:

"The other elements, like the earth, have received some peculiar property which distinguishes them from the rest, and makes them known for what they are. Thus water has cold for its distinguishing property; air, moisture; fire, heat. But this theory really applies only to the primitive elements of the world. The elements which contribute to the formation of bodies, and come under our senses, show us these qualities in combination, and in the whole of nature our eyes and senses can find nothing which is completely singular, simple and pure. Earth is at the same time dry and cold; water, cold and moist; air, moist and warm; fire, warm and dry. It is by the combination of their qualities that the different elements can mingle. Thanks to a common quality each of them mixes with a neighboring element, and this natural alliance attaches it to the contrary element.



For example, earth, which is at the same time dry and cold, finds in cold a relationship which unites it to water, and by the means of water unites itself to air. Water placed between the two, appears to give each a hand, and, on account of its double quality, allies itself to earth by cold and to air by moisture. Air, in its turn, takes the middle place and plays the part of a mediator between the inimical natures of water and fire, united to the first by moisture, and to the second by heat. Finally fire, of a nature at the same time warm and dry, is linked to air by warmth, and by its dryness reunites itself to the earth. And from this accord and from this mutual mixture of elements, results a circle and an harmonious choir whence each of the elements deserves its name."

Where does this discussion come from? Well, it's nowhere in the bible. Basil is commentating on Genesis 1:9 "Let the waters be gathered together unto one place and let the dry land appear." So where does this all come from? Context, context, context. Basil has a viewpoint that there are a set of primordial elements that, along with their natures, make up the entire world. Basil is using Genesis to describe the context of his time. He is taking the truth and trying to show how the belief system of his time (natures, elements, etc.) is from the truth.

Yes, Basil does whole-heartedly believe in his physics, but the more fundamental idea that he holds here is that God created the heavens and the earth. He imbued things with their characteristics. He imbued hydrogen with one proton and one electron. He gave photons incredible speed and gave carbon the incredible properties it needs to make up all that we see. Basil called God the Great Artificer, and perhaps we in the modern day might call him the Great Chemist or Great Particle Physicist.

From Homily 1, Section 10:

"There are inquirers into nature who with a great display of words give reasons for the immobility of the earth. Placed, they say, in the middle of the universe [...] Do not then be surprised that the world never falls: it occupies the centre of the universe, its natural place. By necessity it is obliged to remain in its place, unless a movement contrary to nature should displace it. If there is anything in this system which might appear probable to you, keep your admiration for the source of such perfect order, for the wisdom of God. Grand phenomena do not strike us the less when we have discovered something of their wonderful mechanism. Is it otherwise here? At all events let us prefer the simplicity of faith to the demonstrations of reason."

There is very little basis for this one. Basil here is commentating on Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He is speaking about how God placed everything in order and he gets this one incredibly wrong. Basil is a geocentrist. This is one important thing about understanding Patristic literature: they're people too. Many of them are saints who I even ask for their intercession and prayers, but they're not God. They're going to get things wrong.

Of course, St. Basil is an amazing writer and gives us the incredible spiritual gem of "At all events, let us prefer the simplicity of faith to the demonstrations of reason," but he also gives us an argument about how the earth is immobile and located at the center of the universe. Remember to read the fathers with discernment. Even though they may have played a major role in what goes in it, they are not the bible. There is very little basis for this one. Basil here is commentating on Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." He is speaking about how God placed everything in order and he gets this one incredibly wrong. Basil is a geocentrist.

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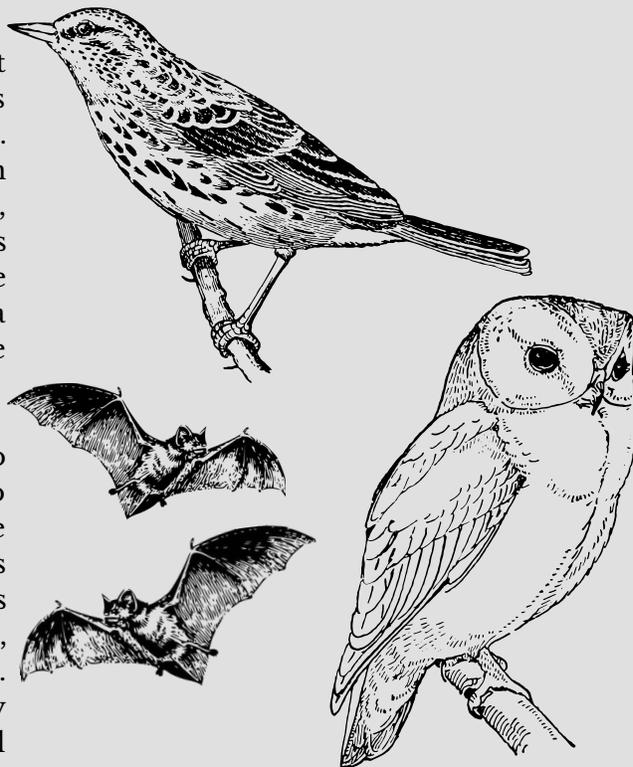
From Homily 8, Section 7:

There are some kinds of birds which live by night in the midst of darkness; others which fly by day in full light. Bats, owls, night-ravens are birds of night: if by chance you cannot sleep, reflect on these nocturnal birds and their peculiarities and glorify their Maker. [...] What natural love bats have for each other! How they interlace like a chain and hang the one upon the other! A very rare spectacle among men, who for the greater part prefer individual and private life to the union of common life. Have not those who give themselves up to vain science the eyes of owls? The sight of the owl, piercing during the night time, is dazzled by the splendor of the sun; thus the intelligence of these men, so keen to contemplate vanities, is blind in presence of the true light.

During the day, also, how easy it is for you to admire the Creator everywhere! See how the domestic cock calls you to work with his shrill cry, and how, forerunner of the sun, and early as the traveler, he sends forth laborers to the harvest! What vigilance in geese! With what sagacity they divine secret dangers! Did they not once upon a time save the imperial city? When enemies were advancing by subterranean passages to possess themselves of the capitol of Rome, did not geese announce the danger? Is there any kind of bird whose nature offers nothing for our admiration?...

This is something that takes very little context to understand, and I think it exemplifies what is most beautiful about the writings of the fathers. Whether he was someone who learned from Jesus in the year 30, a bishop in the year 300, or a 20 year old in the year 2023, a Christian is a Christian. The Fathers have this incredible ability to speak through time. In such a tumultuous time as now, St. Basil's words are more powerful than ever.

Not only does Basil offer a reminder to remember God always and encourage us to ponder creation when we're sleeping, he reminds us about how marvelous something as seemingly mundane birds are. He reminds us that something that we look at as a pest, the bat, is to be commended for relying on each other. He relates how marvelous it is to be awoken by a rooster and to be warned by geese. Basil displays a passion for Christ that is rarely seen.



WHERE TO START?

It can be incredibly confusing as to where to even start when reading the fathers. At the time of writing, a great place to start is an app called Catena Bible. It is an amazing app that collates Patristic (Church Fathers) commentaries on given verses and you can use it just like a standard bible app. It seems to be mostly using a collection of texts called The Ante Nicene Fathers which is widely available online and has a good index that goes by verses of the bible.

There are also ways you can go about exploring haphazardly. Whatever your pathway to the fathers may be, it is acceptable. Find a verse, chapter, or book of the bible you enjoy, look up “Patristic Commentaries on ___” and go from there. Look up homilies on Creation, on Family, on Asceticism, on Prayer. Go wild. Christians have been thinking about many of the same issues we’ve been thinking about. Christianity is a bit like a massive ongoing conversation, and if you’re particularly interested in one particular thread of conversation, take advantage of modern search engine tools that God has blessed our modern world with.

If you want a concrete, Patrick Kingston approved, reading list, here’s where I think you should start:

First for context, read:

- The Old Testament - The foundation of our faith
- The Deuterocanon (the larger Eastern Orthodox one for completeness sake) - Considered canon, or at least half-canon, by most of the Fathers
- The New Testament - The foundation for our faith
- Plato (Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, and Phaedo) - A good introduction to the Platonic worldview. A modern scholarly summary of Platonic thought may also suffice.
- Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics, Metaphysics, and On the Soul) - A good introduction to the Aristotelian worldview. A modern scholarly summary of Aristotelian thought may also suffice.

Second read these texts which were very influential in early Christian circles:

- The shepherd of Hermas - A description of a vision, incredibly important and influential.
- The Didache - The first manual of Christianity. Older than some of the books of the New Testament and considered Canon by some Church Fathers.

The last three can be tackled in any order.

- Latin Fathers
 - Clement of Rome (I Clement) - An early bishop of Rome who wrote at least 1 epistle to Christians who requested it of him.
 - Ambrose of Milan (De officiis ministrorum) - An bishop of Milan who was a fervent defender of the faith, and wrote beautifully.
 - Augustine of Hippo (The City of God, Confessions) - An incredibly important bishop. Highly influential in the history of Catholic and by extension Protestant thought.
- Greek Fathers
 - Justin Martyr (Apology) - An incredibly early writer who discusses how important the logos is.
 - Irenaeus of Lyons (Against Heresies) - A heresiologist who gives a great overview of theology in the context of defending against heretics.
 - John Chrysostom (Paschal Homily, Literally anything) - A bishop of Constantinople. He was known as the golden-tongued for how beautiful his sermons are.

- Basil of Caesarea (Hexaemeron) - Also known as Basil the Great, he was one of the Cappadocian fathers.
- Gregory Nazianzus (Five Theological Orations, Two Letters to Cledonius) - A bishop of Constantinople, remembered as the “Trinitarian Theologian” one of the Cappadocian fathers.
- Gregory of Nyssa (On the Making of Man) - Remembered as a more mystical figure. One of the Cappadocian fathers.
- Syriac Fathers
 - Ephrem the Syrian (The Prayer of Saint Ephrem, Hymns) - An important hymnographer, poet, and bible interpreter.
 - Isaac of Nineveh (anything) - Hailed as an incredible writer, he wrote extensively on the inner life and prayer.
- Desert Fathers
 - The sayings of the Desert fathers - A collection of sayings from early Christian monastics. If you want short pieces of wisdom from some of the earliest Monks, look no further.

If you’ve read all of these things, you’re certainly at a position where you’re ready to start chasing things on your own, but if you’re looking for extra credit check out some of the following:

- Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews) - Important context for Judaism of the 1st century.
- Marcus Aurelius (Meditations) - Important for understanding Stoic philosophy.
- Diogenes Laërtius (Lives of Eminent Philosophers) - A Greek historian who gives a brief overview of several important philosophers and philosophies that would’ve been relevant to the Greek philosophical context.
- Origen of Alexandria (On first principles) - While later declared a heretic, his work was *highly* influential on most early Fathers.
- Philo of Alexandria (Commentary on Genesis) - An incredibly important Jewish philosopher. Deeply important in the context of Hellenistic Judaism.

In the beginning was Hope

Gabby Parker

If you had a Bible right in front, where would you turn to? Would you flip to Psalms to be comforted by the beautiful and raw poems? Maybe you would look to the wisdom found in Proverbs. Or, you might turn to the New Testament to be reminded of how to love one another.

All of these books are good and beneficial to the soul. But so are all the books, including Genesis. Growing up, I always had an elementary view of Genesis, specifically Creation. I mainly viewed it as an account that Christians use as a scientific explanation of the world. This shifted the focus away from God. Whenever this happens, we need to question our views. Upon deep study and reflection, I believe God has graciously transformed my view of Genesis to see the true message.

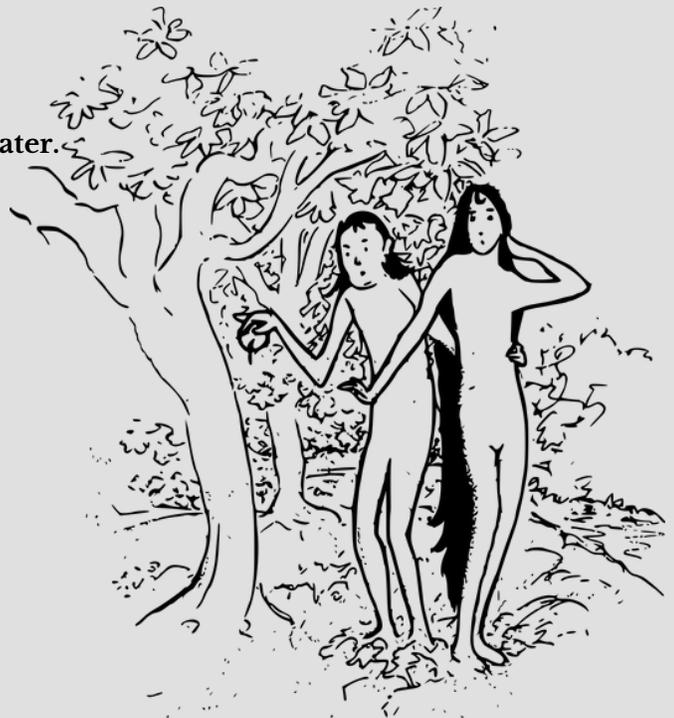
Genesis is the basis of how we should read the rest of Scripture. In order to know God as our Father, we must first realize him to be our Creator. In order to know our sins, we need to know where they originated. In order to understand the gospel, we first need to know why we need the gospel.

First, we must start with God. John 1:3 [ESV] declares, “**All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**” Without our creator, we are hopeless. Not only did he create us, but he also continues to give us breath. As his creatures, there is an overwhelming dependence on him. In Psalm 63:1 King David expresses this truth:

**O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

When we continually cling to God, everything else aligns into place. But unfortunately, this is not what happened in the Garden. Infamously, Adam and Eve fell into sin, cutting off harmonious unity with God. Isaiah 59:2 describes this separation:

**but your iniquities have made a separation
between you and your God,
and your sins have hidden his face from you
so that he does not hear.**



Even in Isaiah's time, hundreds of years later, this sin continued to cause separation between man and God. And still, today we are living with these effects. Romans 5:19 explains this difficult phenomenon; "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Through the first man (Adam), sin spread to all of mankind. But through another man, there is hope. We will study more about this hope later on. In addition to separation from God due to their sin, Adam and Eve also were driven out of the garden. But this was done in grace. Genesis 3:22-23 reveals, "**Then the Lord God said, 'Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—' therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken.**"

This shows two sides of God's character. He has just enforced his justice but now demonstrates mercy. If man had taken the fruit of the tree of life here, all would have lived forever in death and opposition to God. This would be the worst kind of living.

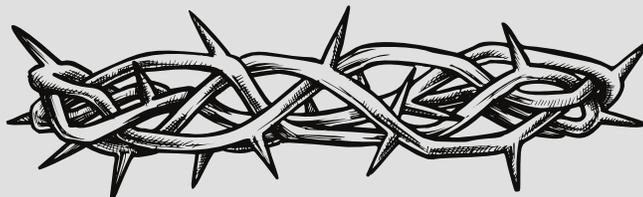
Often, we want to point fingers at God, questioning his judgment and will. But as finite beings, we are shortsighted, not seeing God's good will throughout history. Marvelously, God marries mercy and justice in his providence. We see this famously displayed in the gospel. In Genesis 3:15, God first reveals this hope (spoken of earlier) that future generations would cling to for thousands of years:

**I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.**

In the very same sentence of his judgment, God gives Adam and Eve hope. This offspring of Eve described is Jesus. Genesis foreshadows that Jesus, who is the second Adam, would be the solution to man's significant problem. He would become the perfect sacrifice to appeal to God's justice. Satan would bring harm to Jesus through death on the cross which in turn would conquer death itself when Jesus would be raised from the grave. The very tool Satan would use against Jesus is the same that would bring about his defeat.

Therefore, we can live in hope. This message God granted to not only Adam and Eve but also the rest of mankind. As desperate sinners, may we cling to this hope, believing the promise God gave and fulfilled thousands of years ago.

So, again I ask you...where would you turn to in the Bible if it was in front of you at this very moment? I encourage you to start at the beginning. Recognize the mercy of our Creator. See our sinful state. And above all else, live your life in the fulfilled hope of God.





COMBATING COMPLACENT CHRISTIANITY

William Graf



Have you ever procrastinated? The majority of college students report themselves as chronic procrastinators, and few say they have never procrastinated before. Pushing off important work is easy to do when deadlines are far off, and other activities can bring instant fun. Yet, what would happen if the deadline were moved? Looking at the grade we received, we frequently regret the myopic decisions we made. Now replace the procrastinators with Christians, the deadline with our mortal death, and the work with faith in Jesus Christ. I hope not to regret my choices when our deadlines come; as I often joke with my friends, “I want to pass the final test.”

The fundamental belief of Christianity is that Jesus sacrificed Himself to redeem us from sin, and that through faith in Him we are saved. Many of us as Christians take our Savior for granted, acknowledging God while assuming we are saved and putting off questions about the depth of our belief. Yet how can we be saved if we do not understand what faith entails?

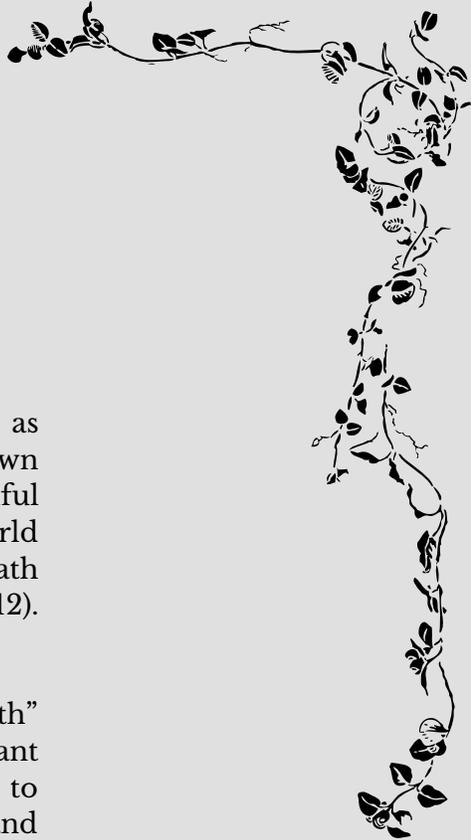
As the Apostle Paul describes, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17 ESV). The Gospel of John begins by further detailing that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Therefore, faith comes through the awareness of God which we obtain through his word. The Apostle Peter expounds on this tenet,

explaining how “grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2). In these ways our “procrastinator Christian” is correct since understanding God is essential to our faith.

While our procrastinating friend may stop there, we will delve further into this aspect of faith. The Lord is clear in stating who knows Him, since “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). If knowing God is love, then we must follow Jesus in saying that “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). From this we learn that faith in the Lord is loving Him, and that God expects His followers to obey Him.

Full obedience to God is no easy task, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). It is natural to fear for our eternities in light of this realization. I often wonder whether I am truly following God’s word or if I am procrastinating in my faith. Yet, I think acknowledgement of our shortcomings is the first step away from being a complacent Christian.

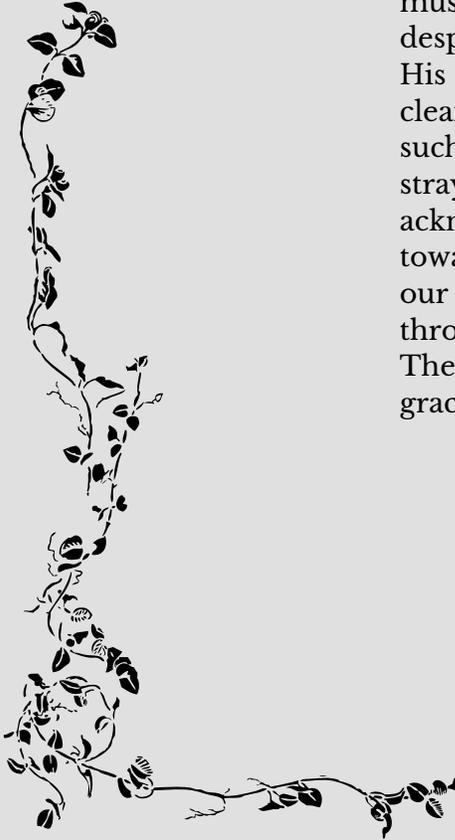
Over the past year we studied the Creation and the origin of sin at the Joseph and Alice McKeen Study Center. From the texts we studied I gleaned an understanding of our inherited sin, brought from the Fall. God created Adam and Eve perfectly “in his own image,” (Genesis 1:27) such that they were not yet of a sinful nature.



However, Adam and Eve fell from grace, and as descendants of Adam who “fathered a son in his own likeness” (Genesis 5:3) we have inherited his sinful nature. “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Our inherited sin has condemned us to death.

The Lord is clear that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), and that is why we must be cognizant of our limited time on earth. We cannot afford to procrastinate since we never know our deadline, and failure means we cannot live an eternal life with our Lord in heaven. Having sinned, we are unworthy of entering the kingdom of God. While we all should fail that “final test,” we may rejoice for God’s love giving us the redemption we never deserved. Jesus, both fully man and fully God, lived a sinless life and died on the cross such that our sins may be forgiven.

We must combat our procrastination towards following the commandments of the Lord, for His will is for us to have faith in Him. Our faith means we must be fully obedient to God to join Him in heaven, despite our inevitable failure in this undertaking. Yet His love gives us another chance. His forgiveness cleans us of our imperfection through Jesus Christ such that we may join His kingdom in heaven. We all stray far away from the glory of God, and we must acknowledge our sinful nature and complacency towards rejecting His word so that we may strengthen our faith and accept God’s gift of eternal life for only through Jesus are our many sins wiped away. Therefore, we as Christians can always rejoice for the grace of Jesus who conquered death and redeemed us.





VOL. 9 | 2022-2023

whatever is good.



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