

Can You See the Big Picture of Salvation?

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Introduction

Sometimes we get too close to our problems and fail to see the larger framework that God is working out in history.

The Judeo-Christian bible teaches us that history is moving toward a divinely appointed goal, and it helps if we step back and look at it from a big picture perspective. This approach is like looking at the top of a puzzle box to see how the puzzle pieces fit together to form a picture.



To help us see the big picture of salvation, the following four thoughts are worth considering:

1. [The reason is bigger than the rescue.](#)
2. [The play is not over until the fat lady sings.](#)
3. [The earth is not the center of the solar system.](#)
4. [Surgeons require more training than mechanics.](#)

1. The Reason is Bigger Than the Rescue

God's purpose in saving us is larger than delivering us from punishment in the afterlife. As beneficial as that is, there are other significant reasons and purposes for God saving and redeeming his creation.

It is true that a primary meaning of salvation in the bible is to rescue from danger and bring to a place of safety and security.

While salvation does include our rescue from sin's guilt and penalty, we are rescued, not as an end unto itself, but so that we can fulfill God's desires for us including all that he has called us to become.



Salvation in Three Tenses: Past, Present, Future

Salvation is a big topic in the bible that involves more than what we usually mean when we talk about "getting saved". In our rush to package and communicate our faith it's easy to over-simplify and strip a good portion of the salvific meat from the bones.

Salvation encompasses rich and deep biblical truths such as election, calling, justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, regeneration, baptism (water and Holy Spirit), sanctification, resurrection, inheritance/reward, and glorification to name a few.

These are big biblical and theological words to be sure, but collectively they help paint a picture of "so great a salvation" (Heb 2:3). It will help us if we expand our vocabulary a little and incorporate some of these broader salvation concepts into our understanding of what it means to be saved.

It is important to understand that salvation as used in the New Testament exists in three tenses: a **past fact**, a **present experience** and a **future hope**:

- Past fact. I have been saved from the *penalty* of sin.
- Present experience. I am being saved from the *power* of sin.
- Future hope. I will be saved from the *presence* of sin.

Past

For by grace you **have been saved** through faith; and that (salvation) not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Eph 2:8 (NASB)

Present

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who **are being saved** it is the power of God.

1 Cor 1:18 (NASB)

Future

It is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now **our salvation is nearer** to us than when we believed.

Rom 13:11 (NASB)

If some Christian meets you on the street and asks you, "Friend, are you saved?", you may reply "Yes" as you think back to your past when you confessed your sins and experienced the forgiveness God offered to you through his Son's substitutionary death. However, if you genuinely believe the 3 tenses of salvation mentioned above, you may decide to answer humorously, "I'm one third saved... maybe a little more".

That response will probably get you some strange looks and you will perhaps be given a few bible verses and a prayer to help you gain "assurance of salvation" so that you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are saved and will "go to heaven when you die".

Salvation as Going to Heaven When We Die

Speaking of which, we should be cautious against reducing salvation to "going to heaven when we die". That commonly quoted phrase can be misleading if we are not careful.

A close study of the biblical text reveals that **heaven is not the ultimate goal** of the redeemed.

I know that assertion may be shocking and goes against popular belief. It deserves elaboration. For starters see J. Richard Middleton, "[A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Case for a Holistic Reading of the Biblical Story of Redemption](#)"¹ (2006), and N.T. Wright's book "Surprised By Hope" (2008), and his short videos about heaven including, "[What Does Heaven Look Like?](#)"², and "[Will God Bring Heaven and Earth Together?](#)"³. See also "[Heaven, or the Kingdom of God?](#)"⁴ (2006) by Dr. Robert Thompson.

1 http://www2.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/Vol11/Middleton_vol11.pdf

2 http://youtu.be/v7vJ6P_r3W0?hd=1 3 <http://youtu.be/V1RsgKQYnTQ?hd=1>

4 <http://www.wor.org/Books/h/heavking1.sn.htm>

In recent years it has been encouraging to see many respected leaders and teachers representing different denominations and Christian traditions speaking of this topic and helping correct the misplaced emphasis that has been put on "going to heaven" as the target and end goal of the Christian faith.

Heaven on Earth

Heaven is **coming to earth** (a renewed earth) and the curse, sin, evil, suffering, pain and death that have made life on earth so miserable ever since the angelic and human rebellions (Gen 3; Gen 6; Gen 11; Isaiah 14; Rev 12) will be forever removed.

Jesus taught us to pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven" (Mat 6:10). This prayer **will not go unanswered**. God's governmental rule (kingdom) is coming to earth, and his appointed ruler is the glorified man, and Son of God, Jesus the Messiah.

As a matter of fact **the invasion and heavenly colonization of earth has already begun**. The good news of the kingdom is being sown like seed among all people in all nations (Mat 13:3-23), and producing a harvest, citizens of the kingdom of God. It will come to fulfillment and complete visible manifestation when Jesus, the Messiah and **appointed world ruler**, returns bodily from heaven to earth to **receive his full inheritance of all the world nations** given to him by his Father.

Ask of Me (the LORD), and I will give You (the Son) **the nations for Your inheritance**, and the **ends of the earth** for Your possession.

Psalms 2:8 (NASB)

And the seventh angel sounded; and there arose loud voices in heaven, saying, **"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever."**

Rev 11:15-16 (NASB)

Salvation is not a train ticket out of here. Many Christians are trying so hard to leave this old world behind and get up to heaven, but God is preparing **to bring Heaven to Earth**, taking up his residence here **permanently**, on earth, among men (Rev 21:3), among saved "nations" (Rev 21:24,26) and with a multitude of holy servants.

God's Permanent Residence

Wouldn't you like to end up in the place where God decides to dwell permanently and establish his throne? That place is **Mount Zion** in the new Jerusalem on the new (renewed) earth, not heaven. Jesus himself promised that the humble disciples of his would **inherit the earth**.

Blessed are the humble, for **they shall inherit the earth**.

Mat 5:5 (NASB)

Do you not know that **the saints will judge (govern) the world?** ...

1 Cor 6:2 (NASB)

He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give **authority over the nations; and he shall rule them...**

Rev 2:26-27 (NASB)

For the LORD has chosen **Zion**; He has desired it for His habitation.

This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

Psalms 132:13-14 (NASB)

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down out of heaven** from God,

...

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and **He shall dwell among them**, and they shall be His people, and **God Himself shall be among them...**

Rev 21:2-3 (NASB)

When we speak of prophetic truths as described in the bible there is certainly some mystery in it all. We are told enough to whet our appetite but not necessarily enough to satisfy our curiosity. But what we are told is sufficient to convince an honest truth-seeker that "going to heaven when you die" is not where the bible puts the teleological emphasis.

The reason is bigger than the rescue, and the rescue is not mainly about getting us to heaven when we die.

There is much more to be said about this topic, but for now we need to leave it at that.

Salvation as Fire Insurance

Some people view their Christianity as an insurance policy, one among many they hold:

- Auto insurance, homeowner's insurance, life insurance, medical insurance
- And oh yes... hell-fire insurance for when I die. I don't want to go there so I need to pay whatever religious premiums I owe (get baptized, go to church, give some money, read the Bible, etc.) to insure against that awful fate.

That is a shallow motivation for Christian living, isn't it? We do the minimum we think is needed to save our skin from punishment in the afterlife.

Our motivation for following God should not be because we're scared of going to hell when we die. Salvation is not fire insurance. It is our duty and desire to obey and love our Creator and Redeemer.

Although Jesus and his apostles do occasionally speak frankly of fatal consequences for those who ultimately refuse to bow the knee to his majesty (Matt. 13:40-42; 2 Thess. 1:6-10), the core gospel message in the New Testament is not "turn or burn". It is more like "turn and learn" about the wonderful salvation your God has accomplished for you through his love and the faithful obedience and redeeming death of his beloved son Jesus.

On the flip side of God's goodness/grace/love, you don't spit in the face of a King to whom you owe your life. If you do there are serious consequences.

Behold then the **kindness** and **severity** of God.

Rom 11:22 (NASB)

Now therefore, O kings, show discernment; take warning, O leaders of the earth,
Serve the LORD **with reverence**, and **rejoice with trembling**.

Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may suddenly be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

Psalms 2:10-12 (NASB)

On a related note, if we read the bible carefully it may surprise us. The lake of fire into which the devil and rebels are thrown isn't the only place we find the fire of God. There is **fire in heaven** too, around the throne of God!

Are we prepared to stand before the blazing throne of the Lord of the universe and have our life inspected by heaven's fire?

Our God is a **consuming fire**.

Heb 12:29 (NASB)

His throne was **flaming with fire**...

Dan 7:9 (NIV)

Each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be **revealed with fire**; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

1 Cor 3:13-15 (NASB)

Reasons for the Rescue

Before we address reasons for the rescue we must qualify our comments a bit. Who can plumb the depths of God's ultimate purposes for humanity and why he is going about things the way he is?

Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How **unsearchable** are his judgments and **unfathomable** his ways.

Rom 11:33 (NASB)

Eye **has not seen**, and ear **has not heard**... all that God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Cor 2:9 (NASB)

However, we can speak of **some** of his purposes and reasons for rescuing us because he has revealed them to us and set them before us as targets to aim for, prizes to be won, and goals to attain through grace and the help of the Holy Spirit.

We can conclude that God delivered us from the penalty and guilt of our sins in order that he might:

- Transform us into his image, which image he declares is humanly modeled by his Son Jesus, our elder Brother and Leader of our salvation (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:9-13) thus creating a family of holy sons and daughters who resemble both Father and Son (Rom 8:14; Heb 12:5-10; Rev 21:7)

- Teach us how to serve in his household and bless others as administrators of his benevolent rule (1 Peter 2:5; Rev 22:3-5)
- Give us an inheritance and reward among those who are sanctified (Acts 26:18)
- Have a people for his own possession (a special treasure); trophies to all creation of his sacrificial, covenant love and grace (1 Peter 2:9)
- Gain a bride for his beloved Son (Eph 5:28-32; Rev 19:7)

These are some of the ultimate purposes that God will bring to pass for those who allow his discipline and grace to transform them. He rescues us from the detour and dead-end of sin, so that we can be put back on the original path and continue the journey to what he has called us to.

It's great to celebrate no longer being lost on the detour, but how much progress have we made now that we are back on the original path? The real celebration awaits those who reach the goal, finishing their journey a winner, having allowed the Holy Spirit and grace to do the necessary work of transforming them, making them pleasing to their Master and satisfying the heart of their heavenly Father.

God's original purpose for mankind has never changed. In Genesis 1, the first chapter of the bible, we are told that man and woman were created to **bear his image** in the earth ("let Us make mankind **in our image**" Gen 1:26) and **be God's vice-regents**, ruling over the earth on his behalf ("let them **rule over** every living thing that moves on the earth" Gen 1:26-29).

Although Adam and Eve failed in this original purpose, Jesus Christ, the Last Adam (1 Cor 15:45), succeeded. In Christ we gain what Adam lost and more.

God rescued us out of our Egypt (slavery to sin and self) in order to bring us into Canaan, the Promised Land (our promised full inheritance and rest from our enemies). In between Egypt and Canaan is the wilderness (our present journey of faith) of testing, learning, and suffering, and the giants in Canaan who must be dispossessed.

Unless we heed the warning of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor 10, we will repeat the mistakes of the Israelites who, except for a few, ended up dying in the wilderness... saved from the slavery in Egypt, but never attaining the goal of their salvation which was to possess their inheritance in Canaan. They made it out of Egypt, but didn't make it into Canaan.

They did not lose their status as the covenant people of God, but they **lost their rightful inheritance** through unbelief and sin.

Nevertheless, with most of them **God was not well-pleased**; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

1 Cor 10:5 (NASB)

Now these things happened to them **as an example**, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

1 Cor 10:11 (NASB)

Jesus, our Captain (Heb 2:10 KJV) and Leader, knows how to get us to the goal of our redemption, the reasons for which we were rescued. Let us look unto him.

Prayer: May we “fix our eyes upon Jesus, the **author** and **perfecter** (finisher) of faith” (Heb 12:2), and be “confident of this very thing, that **he who began** a good work in us **will perfect it** until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

2. The Play Is Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings

God is the supreme strategist and is working out his plans methodically and with precision according to his calendar not ours.

From our perspective He appears to be moving very slowly and we wonder why He takes so long to achieve what he has said he will do.

The delay gives rise to honest questions.

When will God act and bring to completion all the covenantal promises he made to humanity through Abraham, David and ultimately Jesus Christ? When will evil and suffering be eliminated from the cosmos?



How Long, O Lord?

In the middle of our pain and suffering, and the suffering we see around us, we pray to God with tears sometimes running down our face asking, "how long O Lord?".

We read our bibles and find that we are not alone in our questioning. Several thousand years ago we hear the same cries of "how long O Lord" echoed by the Hebrew Psalm writers who struggled just like us (see Psalms 6:3, 13:1, 35:17, 74:10, 89:46, 90:13, 94:3 and others).

How does God respond to these prayers for him to hurry up and make things right?

Well, it seems he answers us in the same way he answered the martyrs "under the altar" (in the apocalyptic bible book of Revelation) who were crying out to him for justice concerning their murders. His reply to them and to us ... **wait for a little while longer**.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

They called out in a loud voice, "**How long**, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to **wait a little longer**, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

Rev 6:9-11 (NIV)

Slow, But Sure

Waiting is hard to do. But make no mistake about it. Even though God moves slow (as we measure time), his end goal is sure to be accomplished.

His sovereign will cannot be thwarted, and he will achieve his purposes.

What God has spoken **will** come to pass.

Remember your history, your long and rich history. I am God, the only God you've had or ever will have— incomparable, irreplaceable— From the very beginning telling you what the ending will be, All along letting you in on what is going to happen, Assuring you, "I'm in this for the long haul, **I'll do exactly what I set out to do.**"

Isaiah 46:9-10 (MESSAGE)

For **the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD** as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 11:9 (NASB)

God-of-the-Angel-Armies (Lord of Hosts) speaks:

Exactly as I planned, **it will happen**. Following my blueprints, it will take shape.

This is the plan, planned for the whole earth, And this is the hand that will do it, reaching into every nation.

God-of-the-Angel-Armies has planned it. Who could ever cancel such plans?

His is the hand that's reached out. Who could brush it aside?

Isaiah 14:24-27 (MESSAGE)

A Multi-Phase Project

Many times large projects are broken up into phases in order to accomplish them. There is a "Phase 1" where certain things are done, followed later by a "Phase 2" that builds upon the first phase.

We did this kind of project planning all the time in the software industry, the business I worked in for over forty years. So do most other industries and professions such as engineering, construction, advertising, etc.

It seems God also has planned his work into **multiple phases** stretched out over **thousands of years**. The Bible calls the phases "ages".

The **present age** in which we live is not the only age. In fact, the Bible characterizes the present age as an "**evil age**". We must not judge what God is doing by what we see happening right now. Doing so would be short-sighted. We need to see the larger, multi-phase "project plan" to put things into perspective.

The redemptive project that God is carrying out is bigger and grander than any of us can imagine. It has **cosmic implications** for ages to come.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this **present evil age**, according to the will of our God and Father

Gal 1:3-4 (NASB)

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us... made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)... in order that **in the ages to come** He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:4-7 (NASB)

In this present evil age (Phase 1) there is death, mourning, crying and pain. These are what the Bible calls "**first things**" (Rev 21:4). Did you comprehend that? These are only "first" things that will pass away.

God has promised a future age (Phase 2), the "**age to come**", where all things are **finally made right**.

It's worth noting that there is actually an **overlapping** of the two phases (this age and the age to come) where some features of Phase 2 have already begun while Phase 1 is still going on. Biblical scholars often refer to this situation as "**the already, but not yet**".

Through the Holy Spirit's gifts and ministries, followers of the risen Christ can actually begin to taste/experience something of the "**powers of the age to come**" even during this age (Heb 6:5). In a sense spirit-filled Christians are "people from the future", helping demonstrate in the here-and-now a little of what life will be like in the age to come.

God will eventually purge and eliminate all evil, pain and suffering from both the earth and heavens resulting in a renewed, Edenic environment. This future age is not to be located in some ethereal other-worldly sphere, but upon the "heavenized" earth, the battleground where humanity (including Jesus) toiled, suffered and died. This is our hope.

But according to His promise we are looking for **new heavens** and a **new earth**, in which righteousness dwells.

2 Peter 3:13 (NASB)

Evil's Days Are Numbered

The present evil age will give way to an age of rest and peace where evil can no longer threaten and hurt God's creation.

In the interim we must not confuse God's long-suffering of evil with his approval of it, or perceive him as powerless to stop it.

Due to the presence of evil the following argument is put forth by some as proof that a loving, all-powerful God does not exist:

1. If God were all-powerful he could destroy evil.
2. If God were all-good he would destroy evil.
3. Evil has not been destroyed.
4. Therefore there is no good, all-powerful God.

What is wrong with this argument? The problem is that premise 3 is only half true.

- Evil has not been destroyed **yet**.
- Evil **will be destroyed**... God is just doing it in stages over a very long time.

The decisive battle against evil **was won 2,000 years ago** by Jesus the Messiah, at great personal cost, in an excruciating death on a Roman cross outside the city of Jerusalem. But the **eviction process** (totally removing evil from the creation) has not yet been completed. But rest assured, the eviction of Satan, rebel angels, and unrighteous/evil people from the creation is coming.

Right now God is letting both the wheat (good) and the tares (evil) grow together. Evil must have its day and **be given time to ripen and mature** before God deals with it in a **permanent** way.

In God's wisdom it must be very important to him and strategic to his plan for evil to be given sufficient time to indelibly record on history's pages its awful outcome before God wipes it out forever from his cosmos, and fatally crushes the snake's head.

The Eviction and Removal of Evil from the Creation

The God of peace **will soon crush Satan** under your feet.

Rom 16:20 (NASB)

And **the devil** who deceived them (the nations) was **thrown into to lake of fire** and brimstone...

And **Death** and **Hades** were **thrown into the lake of fire**. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if **anyone's name was not found written in the book of life**, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Rev 20:10,14,15 (NASB)

Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man (Jesus) will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom **all stumbling blocks**, and **those who commit lawlessness**, and will **cast them into the furnace of fire...**

Mat 13:40-42 (NASB)

Evil's days are numbered. Harvest day is coming when the wheat will be gathered into the barn and the tares will be bundled up and destroyed in the fire. See Mat 13:24-30 for the parable about the Wheat and Tares, and Mat 13:36-43 for the explanation Jesus gave about the parable.

The Theodicy Problem

Knowing what we do about God's intense love for humanity, and his hatred for evil and the suffering it has caused, it is unfathomable to us how he can be so patient and long-suffering while evil has its day (or more accurately... its age).

We fancy ourselves wiser than God in this regard... we would not tolerate evil and injustice for so long like he is doing. He appears to us to be sitting on his hands. Why doesn't he do more **now**? Many agree with Woody Allen, the American film director, when he said:

"If it turns out that there is a God... the worst that you can say about him is that basically he's an underachiever." Woody Allen

Maybe it appears that way with respect to God intervening to end evil and suffering, but an underachiever he is not. He created a universe that now has an estimated diameter of 93 billion light-years (5.5×10^{23} miles) containing *at least* 2 trillion galaxies, each galaxy having between 10 million to 1 trillion stars. And the bible declares "He **counts the number** of the

stars, He **gives names** to all of them” (Psalms 147:4). That level of intelligence/memory is off the charts, relatively speaking.



We know God’s wisdom is off the charts too, which means he created the best of all possible worlds, with free agents who can choose good or evil, and have the freedom of will to either seek him, ignore him or oppose him. And he is providentially guiding the world he created to its paradisiacal destiny, no matter how bad things appear now.

For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9 (NASB)

The anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

... for we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.

Rom 8:19,22 (NASB)

Although God may be delaying the solution to the **theodicy** problem, he is not indifferent to our pain. He suffers alongside his creation. He is not some aloof God who cannot feel our hurt or hear our cries for help. He hears. He sympathizes. He comforts. Sometimes he intervenes and delivers, sometimes he does not. In all cases his Holy Spirit gives us grace and strength to be patient and hold up under difficult and sometimes awful/horrendous circumstances.

He obviously has his reasons for allowing so much time to pass before he rises to "**judge the earth**" (Psalm 82:8), destroy all evil, consummate his governmental rule and take up his residence on the earth. And he doesn’t seem to feel the need to fully explain his strategy to us right now (read the biblical story of Job). Instead, he asks us to trust him until the good-vs-evil “war of the ages” is over.

One reason for delay is that God is giving us **space to repent** (Rev 2:21), not willing that any should perish. But we mustn't presume on his patience. **Today** is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2). **Today** if you hear his voice don't harden your hearts (Heb 4:7). Is your heart hard? Do you hear his small voice prompting you, and giving you time to change direction while he patiently/lovingly waits? Don't delay any longer, please.

When the fat lady sings then we will know that the play is at its end. But she has not yet sung. We must take advantage of that now.

The Fat Lady Sings

And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land lifted up his right hand to heaven, and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and the things in it, and the earth and the things in it, and the sea and the things in it, that **there shall be delay no longer**.

But **in the days of the voice of the seventh angel**, when he is about to sound, **then** the mystery of God is finished, as he preached to his servants the prophets.

Rev 10:5-7 (NASB)

Prayer: May God help us wait a while longer, and not give up on the future he has promised to bring to pass. While we wait for the final episode of this drama, may he help us be his agents of love, reconciliation and transformation in a creation poisoned by sin and groaning under the consequences of an evil-permeated world.

3. The Earth Is Not the Center of the Solar System

Galileo, the 17th century Italian physicist and astronomer, was summoned to Rome in 1633 by the Roman Catholic Inquisition on charges of grave suspicions of heresy.

He was running around picking fights with Church officials over his scientific theories that the earth rotated daily on its axis, and revolved around the sun.

This contradicted the current Church doctrine that the earth was the center of the universe.

Galileo was forced to stand trial and recant his belief saying:

"Because I have been enjoined, by this Holy Office, to abandon the false opinion that the Sun is the center and immovable... I abjure, curse, and detest the said errors and heresies... contrary to the said Holy Church"

(Galileo - June 22, 1633)



Galileo facing the Roman Inquisition
1857 painting by Cristiano Banti

He was sentenced to permanent house arrest for the last 8 years of his life. His book on the subject was ordered to be banned and burned. Galileo died a devout, but muzzled, Catholic.

In 1992 in Vatican City, 359 years after Galileo's trial, Pope John Paul II officially admitted the Church's error and apologized for the false charge against Galileo.

Is Our Frame of Reference Wrong?

We know today, without a doubt, the sun is the center of the solar system, not the earth.

Prior to the discoveries of Galileo (and previously Copernicus) the frame of reference regarding the solar system was wrong. With an incorrect frame of reference men could not understand the planetary and solar movement in the heavens.

However, when the sun was placed at the center instead of the earth, pieces of the celestial puzzle began to fall into place.

If we apply this lesson from history to our understanding of God's purposes and plans we can see how we too have perhaps embraced a wrong frame of reference with respect to **what is at the center** of our belief system:

- We repeat the error of Galileo's religious accusers when we adopt a view that life revolves around earth (man), instead of the sun (God/Christ). That is, when we live our lives with a man-centered frame of reference instead of a God-centered one.
- When a **man-centered mindset** creeps into our churches it begins to usurp the place of God and his Son as the center of our Christianity.
- The world view that has man at the center instead of God leads to radically different expectations and interpretations of life. Having a false center puts us at risk of becoming disillusioned, bitter or even shipwrecked as Christians when God doesn't revolve around our world like we think he should.

As Christians are we being subtly influenced by a man-centered way of thinking, or will we rightfully reject anything that attempts to put man at the center instead of God, his name, his glory and his Son?

Man at the Center

What is a man-centered frame of reference? First of all, it is not necessarily a view that rules out God or doesn't believe in the bible. Christian believers can have this mindset too.

A man-centered mindset begins with man as the center and works its way out from there.

Our culture and advertising reinforce this "**me first**" way of thinking by constantly reminding us that the most important things are **our** rights, **our** needs, **our** wants, **our** hurts, **our** comfort, **our** dreams, **our** security.

We as wealthy (relatively speaking) American Christians chasing the "American dream" are in particular danger of embracing some of the philosophy of Humanism without even realizing we are doing it, and allowing that philosophy to shape our Christian world view.

Humanism places the needs of humanity as a whole at the center of all universal concerns. This focus is seen in the following quote taken from the Humanist manifesto:

"...the quest for the good life is still the central task for mankind".

([Humanist Manifesto I - 1933](#); see also the [1973](#) version)

The quest for the good life (here and now) is not the central task for mankind according to Jesus. He lays out a different set of priorities:

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness...

Mat 6:33 (NASB)

And He was saying to all, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, **let him deny himself**, and **take up his cross** daily, and **follow Me**. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?

Luke 9:23-25 (NASB)

This is not to suggest that our needs, cares and wants are unimportant to God. They are important, but they are **secondary**, not primary, in the bigger scheme of things. God will take care of us because he loves and values us dearly:

... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (food, drink, clothing, etc.)

Mat 6:32 (NASB)

Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Luke 12:6-7 (NASB)

Even though our needs are important to God, we are taught by Christ to "deny self" and not let our happiness and comfort be the focal point around which we orient our life.

To quote a popular phrase in our culture, "**It's not all about you**".

This is not to imply that the needs of humanity and society are unimportant either. The God of the Hebrew and Christian bible makes it clear that he is very concerned about social injustice, the poor, the marginalized, orphans, widows and all who suffer. And he instructs those who love him to do good works, help make a positive difference in society, and not ignore the hurting and oppressed.

These individual and societal concerns, important as they are, have their place but **do not occupy the central place** in a biblical world view. That central place is reserved for only one

person, Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God who suffered and died a horrible death to reconcile humanity back to its creator.

Christ at the Center

The God-centered mindset begins at a radically different starting point, namely God and his Son Jesus, and then interprets the world from God's perspective, not man's. What God desires for us to have at the center of our world view is a genuine concern for his honor and his plans which include the honor of his beloved Son (John 5:22-23; Mark 9:7).

This "Theo-centric" and "Christo-centric" mindset is concerned with a whole different set of plans, purposes, desires and goals. It asks the questions:

1. What objective is God after? What delights his heart? Where do we fit within his purposes?
2. What rights does Jesus, the Messiah have as creator, redeemer and head of the church?
3. How can we glorify God, honor his name, and further his desires?

I learned early on in my professional career how to get a raise/promotion from my boss. If you don't already know it, let me share with you the secret: **find out what is important to your boss, and make that your goal.**

There is some confusion of roles going on in the Christian church today. We act like God exists for us instead of the other way around.

Let us state the truth clearly:

- God does not exist for man. Man exists for God.
- God's rights come first. We were created for his glory, not the other way around.

Although God loves us dearly and promises to take care of us, he is not the heavenly butler...

- He is **God Almighty**.
- He is **LORD of Hosts** (angelic armies).
- He is **The All-Consuming Fire**.

He is "...the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen" (1 Tim 6:15-16 NASB)

Why Did God Create Us?

The bible tells us the primary reason God created us, but it's easy to miss if we don't pay close attention.

We Exist for God the Father

Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and **we exist for Him...**"

1 Cor 8:6 (NASB)

We Were Created For Jesus Christ

He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created... **all things were created by Him and for Him.** He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.

Col 1:15-18 (NIV)

Note the two occurrences of "**for Him**" in the above verses. These short phrases are pregnant with the ultimate purposes and reasons for why we exist and why we were created.

1. We exist **for God the Father**, the source of all things.
2. All things (*that includes us too*) were created **for Jesus Christ**. God desires that Jesus be given the place of preeminence and supremacy in the cosmos.

A God-Centered Gospel Message

Many churches today preach a gospel message consisting of two basic truths:

1. Forgiveness of sins through Jesus' death/resurrection
2. Assurance of heaven when you die

Without meaning it the focus of this message can become very man-centered if we emphasize only man's need (forgiveness, blissful after-life) and not God's glory and goal in saving man. To repeat, it's not all about us... it's about God too.

The gospel that the apostles in the early church preached was very God and Christ-centered. Forgiveness of sins is only one aspect of God's creative and redemptive goals which converge on making Christ preeminent including:

1. Seating Christ upon the throne of David as earth's world-ruler, giving him the nations of the world as his inheritance (Psalm 2) with every creature acknowledging verbally that he indeed is God's choice, and every knee bowing before him as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11)
2. Giving Christ a holy, pure, spotless bride and co-regent consisting of people who have bound themselves to him in love and obedience (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:27; Rev 19:7)
3. Filling the universe with Christ's benevolent rule and administration, "summing up" all things by means of Christ (Eph 1:10), who is God's mystery, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:2-3).

The Lord's Prayer – A Pattern

As evidence of the God-centered approach that we need to learn, look closely at the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, commonly referred to as the "Lord's prayer" (Mat 6:8-13).

The prayer consists of seven petitions: three concerning God's name, kingdom and will; followed by four concerning our food, moral debts, temptations and deliverance/protection.

Note the order: first, pray for God's interests, then pray for our needs.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,

First Three Petitions - God's Interests

- 1) Hallowed be Thy name.
- 2) Thy kingdom come.
- 3) Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Next Four Petitions - Man's Need

- 4) Give us this day our daily bread,
- 5) And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
- 6) And do not lead us into temptation,
- 7) But deliver us from evil.

Mat 6:19-13 (NASB)

Unfortunately, most of us ignore this two-fold pattern when praying. We jump right into praying about our needs (health, finances, children, etc.) instead of first taking time to align ourselves with the larger perspective concerning God's interests (his name, his kingdom, his will).

Prayer: May God help orient us to his way of thinking and priorities by disabusing us of our false notions that we are the center of his solar system. May we give him his rightful place and find our fulfillment in giving him pre-eminence and centrality in everything we do.

4. Surgeons Require More Training than Mechanics

God is preparing a family of “first-born” sons patterned after his beloved Son (Rom 8:29; Heb 12:23).

They will serve and minister to him, see his face, and have his name on their foreheads (Rev 22:3-4).

He will lavish unimaginable love and grace upon them (Eph 2:7) and give them great glory.

God will place these trusted, resurrected humans in positions of influence within his creation (Luke 19:17).



As authorized members of the Royal Family they will assist him and Christ with:

- Governing the universe as co-regents
- Administering his great household
- Blessing all creation

But you are a chosen race, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

1 Pet 2:9 (NASB)

Do you not know that **the saints will judge the world**? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?

1 Cor 6:2 (NIV)

He who overcomes, **I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne**, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

Rev 3:21 (NASB)

And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may **gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ**.

2 Thess 2:14 (NASB)

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to **shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son**. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him.

Rom 8:29-30 (MESSAGE)

The High Calling

The Bible refers to the elevated and noble destiny of the Christian believer as our "high calling" (Philippians 3:14 KJV), or as another translation renders it, "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (NASB).

The book of Hebrews mentions our "heavenly calling" (Heb 3:1 NIV). It is a heavenly calling because it represents a summons out of heaven from God to us.

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the **high calling** of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13-14 (KJV)

Therefore, holy brothers, who share in **the heavenly calling**, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

Heb 3:1 (NIV)

We were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who **calls you into His own kingdom and glory**.

1 Thess 2:11-12 (NASB)

The primary purpose of the heavenly calling is not to relocate us from earth to heaven. Acquiring angel wings and playing harps on clouds is not an accurate picture of what God has destined us for.

Our high and heavenly calling is God's invitation to us to realize our highest potential as redeemed ones from Adam's fallen race.

We are offered the unique privilege of joining the Royal Family as trusted co-regents and friends, confidants among the Heavenly Council, adopted sons and daughters who have access to God's personal residence and throne room, beholders of the Face of God (Mat 5:8) and the unapproachable light that no mortal can see and live (1 Tim 6:16).

The Sanctified Obtain the Inheritance

Obtaining our inheritance in the kingdom of God is part of our high calling (Eph 1:18; Col 3:24).

The pathway to obtaining our full inheritance is **sanctification**. Sanctification is the biblical word for spiritual growth and maturity - a gradual process that can transform us into true Christ-like people if we allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us.

Sanctification is **not automatic or instantaneous**. The process begins at our new birth when the seed of the Word of God creates new spiritual life within us. This seed of Christ begins to grow and permeate every area of our personality. We can slow down and hinder this process and fail to make progress if we resist the Spirit's work and discipline in our lives.

Every child of God has the potential for obtaining their inheritance, but given the frequent warnings in the New Testament it appears that not every child of God will obtain it. Sanctification is the prerequisite to obtaining the inheritance.

"**Inheriting the kingdom**" refers to mature believers being put into trusted positions of responsibility and influence in God's future kingdom because they have been tested and proven faithful to God. These are believers who not only have their sins forgiven, but in addition to that, they have gone on to learn the ways of God, and have allowed him to effect a genuine change in their character and personality to conform them to what God desires from a son or daughter of God.

Losing our inheritance means that we, like Esau who was Isaac's firstborn son, can forfeit what could have been ours in the future (our firstborn birthright) if we value immediate sensual gratification here and now. Esau sold his inheritance birthright to Jacob for a bowl of soup. Esau did not forfeit his being a member of Isaac's family, but he did lose his firstborn inheritance rights within the family (Heb 12:16-17).

And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to **give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.**

Acts 20:32 (NASB)

“And I (Paul) said, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. ‘But arise, and stand on your feet; for this purpose I have appeared to you, ... delivering you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins **and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.**’

Acts 26:15–18 (NASB)

Pursue peace with all men, **and the sanctification** without which no one will see the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14 (NASB)

The Training

Since our destiny and calling is so high, God is giving us an education that will fit and equip us for our responsibilities both now and in the ages to come.

Just as surgeons require more training than many other professions in order to develop the specialized skills necessary to perform their life-saving operating room procedures, the training for a son of God is intense and lengthy.

Our training is customized by God for our unique personalities to produce in us the image of Christ that God wants to see.

The education and training we receive is commensurate with the person God wants us to become and the function he has prepared for us to fulfill.

God's training is no mere academic education where we gain only "book knowledge" about God and spiritual matters. It is a rigorous, lifelong internship where our mentor, the Holy Spirit, working internally within us, as well as through other people and circumstances, teaches us on-the-job how to live as Christ lived, speak as Christ spoke, love as Christ loved, endure as Christ endured, trust as Christ trusted, and on and on.

The Suffering

This training requires suffering so count on it. It is unavoidable. The bible is very clear about it even though we don't like to pin these suffering verses on our refrigerators.

For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, **to perfect the author of their salvation (Jesus) through sufferings**. For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren.

Heb 2:10–11 (NASB)

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to **those who have been trained by it**, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Heb 12:7-11 (NASB)

Through many **tribulations** we must enter the kingdom of God.

Acts 14:22 (NASB)

Since Jesus went through everything you're going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your **sufferings** as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way.

1 Peter 4:1 (MESSAGE)

God puts us through the wringer, so to speak, allowing us to experience some very painful things along the way that make us wonder sometimes if he still loves us and is with us. These difficulties literally test our trust in God by forcing us to learn how to endure and wait under pressure without losing confidence in him.

At those moments it's good to remember that even the sinless Christ learned obedience through the things he suffered. In fact, if we don't experience the Father's training and discipline, we should be worried, because we are promised that God "scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb 12:6). No believer is exempt from the school of suffering.

Change does not come easy. As God works on us there will be times when we feel like slowing down or even giving up. The bible refers to this situation using several descriptive phrases:

- "becoming sluggish" (Heb 6:12)
- "throwing away our confidence" (Heb 10:35)
- "fainting" (Heb 12:5)
- "growing weary" (Heb 12:3)
- "losing heart" (2 Cor 4:16; Gal 6:9; Heb 12:3)

During difficult times we must resist the temptation to pull away from God. Instead, we must keep the conversation alive with him. We must remember that the Holy Spirit is interceding for us (Rom 8:26-27). And Christ, our High Priest in heaven, is also interceding for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25). That represents some powerful intercession on our behalf!

We must pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1), making our appeals before his "throne of grace". It is there we will find mercy and grace to endure, and strength to continue our journey of faith (Heb 4:14-16).

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:5).

The Pursuit

God desires us to embrace the "high calling" as our life goal - something we press toward with unrelenting passion and discipline. Our leader, Jesus, showed us how it's done. He was the front-runner, and he is now coaching us along the same path. A servant is not above his master (Mat 10:24).

Nothing external or internal must be tolerated if it hinders us from reaching this finish line. Anything that would weigh us down, even if something not inherently sinful, must be set aside so that we can focus on graduating with honors and hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mat 25:23).

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? **Run in such a way as to get the prize.** Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Cor 9:24-27 (NIV)

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to **make certain about His calling and choosing you**; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

2 Peter 1:10-11 (NASB)

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and **let us run with endurance the race that is set before us**, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

Heb 12:1-3 (NASB)

The Prize Winners

The high calling is offered to us as a prize to win, like a runner who competes in a race. We are not striving to obtain the gift of eternal life, for that is freely given to all through Jesus Christ's sacrificial death. But after having been justified by faith in Christ we are instructed to begin the race for the prize.

Will we be counted among that number who reach their potential in Christ and obtain the prize of the high calling (Philippians 3:14)? Or will we take the low road, choosing comfort instead of self-denial and sacrifice?

What kind of people will reach their high calling... the goal God has set before all believers?

The winners will be sanctified believers who through faith and patience (Heb 6:11-12) have allowed Christ to be formed in them (Gal 4:19). The clay of their personalities will have been gradually softened and molded by the master Potter into the likeness of Christ (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18).

We suspect these believers will exhibit most if not all of the traits below, and more:

- They are joyful lovers of both God and men (Mat 22:37-40).
- They are fruitful and mature sons of God trained in his ways and values.
- They are tested disciples proven faithful through a lifetime of weakness, irritations, disappointments and suffering.
- They are obedient followers of Christ's commands (John 14:15; Mat 28:20) having Gods instruction written on the tablets of their heart (Heb 10:16; 2 Cor 3:2-3).
- They are humbled and meek people who have learned through struggle and failure their spiritual poverty (Mat 5:3) causing them to utterly depend on God's forgiveness, grace and Holy Spirit to enable them to overcome their sinful desires, apathy, personality flaws, self-love and self-will.
- They are full of good deeds (Mat 5:16) to those around them; deeds which God ordained for them (Eph 2:10)
- They are unashamed to bear the name of Christ (Mat 10:32-33)
- They are not afraid to die for their faith if called upon to do so (Rev 2:10; Rev 12:11)

They will be resurrected followers of the glorified Christ, clothed in awesome radiant bodies like his own (Philippians 3:21). They will be presented to Christ as glorious and chaste members of the bride of The Lamb (Eph 5:28-32).

The Glory

It will all be worth it in the end. Every bit of it.

The established pattern for Christ and his followers is suffering first, followed later by glory.

And He (Jesus) said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! “Was it not necessary for the Christ to **suffer** these things and to enter into His **glory**?” And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Luke 24:25–27 (NASB)

And after you have **suffered** for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal **glory** in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. To Him be dominion forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 5:10–11 (NASB)

I consider that our present **sufferings** are not worth comparing with the **glory** that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Rom 8:18-21 (NIV)

Surgeons require more training than mechanics. They go to school longer than most, and after graduating medical school they spend many long hours in internships to develop their skills. They pay a price up front, but are rewarded richly later in life.

Our great destiny as children of God and believers in Christ requires us to pay a price up front to reach the goal of our salvation. However, the benefit will far exceed the cost for those who stay in the race and don't drop out.

Prayer: Lord, please prepare us for our privileged destiny as your firstborn sons, and help us all finish our journey as winners, well-pleasing to you. We want to enter into the rest and joy of our Master (Mat 25:21). Only through your grace can we run the race and gain the prize of our high calling. Help us do our part and trust you to bring us to maturity. Amen.