

T W O

THE PURPOSE OF THE WORLD

To help us understand the nature and purpose of the world as God created it, let us imagine an alternative world. Let us imagine an infinite, or at least nearly infinite, flat plain. This flat plain is inhabited by people. These people exist to glorify God. They do this by praising Him, and by developing in their social relationships with one another. These people never need to sleep, and so there is no alternating of night and day. These people get their energy directly from the Holy Spirit, so there is no need for food. There are no animals, plants, or gemstones in this world. There are only people, interacting with God and with other people, on a nearly infinite flat plain.

God could have made such a world, but He didn't. And this raises the question of why God chose to fill up the world with all kinds of things. Why create geographical diversity: mountains, rivers, seas, wildernesses? Why create animals, plants, bushes, trees, fish, and birds? Why create alternating days and nights, weeks and years, with sun, moon, and stars measuring them? In other words, why *this* world?

We cannot give a direct answer to this question. Ultimately, God made the world the way it is because it was His pleasure to do so. We can say, however, that this world was made for man, and that all its furniture and features were made for man's good.

David sets out man's position in the world in Psalm 8:

When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers,
The moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained;
What is man, that Thou does take thought of him?
And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?

And Thou hast made him a little lower than God,
And dost crown him with glory and majesty.
Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands;
Thou hast put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen,
And also the beasts of the field,
The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
Whatever passes through the paths of the seas. (vv. 3-8)

Notice how David's statement differs from what we often hear today. "Man is just a speck in the vast cosmic universe" is a common modern viewpoint; it is not David's. David begins by considering the heavens, which he knew symbolized God's people, according to God's word to Abraham (Genesis 15:5). The stars are splendid, yet God does not take thought for them, but for man. How much greater is man!

Man was originally created, says David, only a little lower than God Himself. Of course as a creature, man was infinitely "lower" than God; yet as God's viceroy over creation, man was just under Him in the chain of command. This is not the end of the story, though, says David. It is only the beginning, because man is to grow and develop and eventually be crowned with glory and majesty.

Man's dominion over the world as God's viceroy and man's growth in glory and honor are connected with the world, says David. All things were put under man's feet. The highest forms of the natural world, made on the fifth and sixth days of creation, are the animals, and these are listed as under man's dominion. This implies that the animal world, and the rest of creation, was made to assist man in his growth in glory.

This is because all these things reveal God. It is our interaction with God that causes us to grow. It is because everything in the world reveals God to us that we can grow by interacting with the world. We need to explore this in some detail, because it is fundamental to the Biblical view of the world.

The World Reveals God

Romans 1:20 tells us that the world reveals God: "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen." Psalm 19:1-2

tells us that the heavens reveal God: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament is declaring the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge." Job 12:7-9 tells us that the animal kingdom reveals God:

But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you; and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you. Or speak to the earth, and let it teach you; and let the fish of the sea declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?

We mentioned earlier that any work of art bears the impress of the artist who made it. The music of Beethoven does not sound like the music of Josquin. The Apostle Paul's writing style is not the same as the Apostle John's. We can hear and detect these differences, even if we lack the particular expertise to explain what accounts for them.

But suppose that the only composer who ever lived was Johann Sebastian Bach. There is no music in this world except that of Bach. Whenever we hear music in this world, it sounds like Bach's music. It may be played well or badly but the fundamental raw material is always Bach, only Bach, nothing but Bach. Now, since there is no other music to compare this music to, would we be able to "hear" Bach's personality in the music? Or would it be easy for us to forget about Bach, and assume that "music simply *is*"?

The problem with hearing or detecting God's authorship of the world is just like this. There is no other world to compare God's world to. There is no "music" except God's. It can be "played" well or perversely, but there are no other raw materials at hand. God's personality is fully displayed in the world, but it is easy for us to become deaf to this fact.

The Bible tells us that this deafness and blindness is sin: "For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). This verse describes the origin of secular philosophy. The sinner does not want to see God's personality displayed in His works, and so he comes up with alternative explanations of the universe. The "universe sim-

ply *is*." In philosophy, this "*is-ness*" is called "Being." Ultimately, all non-Christian philosophy assumes that the universe is uncreated and made of neutral "Being." Such a universe is silent. For the Christian, however, the universe is created by God, and constantly speaks of Him.²

We have seen that God's personality is revealed in everything in creation. Let us return, for a moment, to the question we raised at the beginning of this chapter: Why this world with all this diversity? Why not just man and God, interfacing together, with man growing and developing from this interaction? I believe the answer to this, in part, lies in the fact that God is infinite and man is finite. We simply cannot grasp God's infinite tri-personality all at once. For this reason, God chose to reveal the infinity of His personality in the diversity of this world. Various things in the world reveal various things about God. As we interface with these different things in the world, we are indirectly interfacing with God, who is revealed in them.

The great conservative nineteenth-century theologian, Herman Bavinck, put it this way:

We do not see God as he is in himself. We behold him in his works. We name him according to the manner in which he has revealed himself in his works. To see God face to face is for us impossible, at least here on earth. If, nevertheless, God wills that we should know him, he must needs descend to the level of the creature. He must needs accommodate himself to our limited, finite, human consciousness.³

Accordingly, "Scripture calls upon the entire creation, i.e., upon nature in its several spheres, and especially upon man, to contribute to the description of the knowledge of God."⁴

St. Augustine provides an illustration:

On earth a fountain is one thing, a light is another. When thou art athirst, thou seekest a fountain, and to get to the fountain thou seekest light; and if it is not day, thou lightest a lamp to get to the fountain. God himself is both a fountain and a light: to the thirsting a fountain; to the blind a light.⁵

Theologians call God's self-revelation in the world "natural revelation."⁶ As Professor John Frame explains,

Everything in creation bears some analogy to God. All the world has been made with God's stamp on it, revealing Him. Creation is His temple, heaven His throne, earth His footstool. Thus Scripture finds analogies to God in every area of creation: inanimate objects (God the "rock of Israel," Christ the "door of the sheep," the Spirit as "wind," "breath," "fire"), plant life (God's strength like the "cedars of Lebanon," Christ the "bread of life"), animals (Christ the "Lion of Judah," the "lamb of God"), human beings (God as king, landowner, lover; Christ as prophet, priest, king, servant, son, friend), abstract ideas (God as spirit, love, light; Christ as way, word, truth, life, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption). Even wicked people reveal their likeness to God, with, of course, much irony — see Luke 18:1-8.⁷

Similarly, Bavinck wrote that God

is compared to a lion, Isaiah 31:4; an eagle, Deuteronomy 32:11; a lamb, Isaiah 53:7; a hen, Matthew 23:37; the sun, Psalm 84:11; the morning star, Revelation 22:16; a light, Psalm 27:1; a torch, Revelation 21:23; a fire, Hebrews 12:29; a fountain, Psalm 36:9; the fountain of living waters, Jeremiah 2:13; food, bread, water, drink, ointment, Isaiah 55:1; John 4:10; 6:35, 55; a rock, Deuteronomy 32:4; a hiding place, Psalm 119:114; a tower, Proverbs 18:10; a refuge, Psalm 9:9; a shadow, Psalm 91:1; 121:5; a shield, Psalm 84:11; a way, John 14:6; a temple, Revelation 21:22, etc.⁸

All this can be boiled down to a simple fact: The universe and everything in it symbolizes God. That is, the universe and everything in it points to God. This means that the Christian view of the world is and can only be *fundamentally symbolic*. The world does not exist for its own sake, but as a revelation of God.

Man Reveals God

Genesis 1:26 tells us that man was made as the preeminent and particular image of God: "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." Man, then, is the special symbol of God. As Bavinck put it,

Something of God is manifest in each creature, but of all creatures man is endowed with the highest degree of excellence.

The exalted title: image, son, child of God, is borne by him alone. The name: God's offspring (Acts 17:28), is peculiar to man.⁹

Van Til writes, "Man was created an analogue of God; his thinking, his willing, and his doing is therefore properly conceived as at every point analogical to the thinking, willing, and doing of God."¹⁰

Thus, says Bavinck, whatever pertains to man can be applied to God,

especially "human organs, members, sensations, affections," etc. God has a soul, Leviticus 26:11; Matthew 12:28; and a Spirit, Genesis 1:2; etc. Mention is never made of God's body, although in Christ God assumed a real human body, John 1:14; Colossians 2:17; and the church is called the body of Christ, Ephesians 1:22; but all the terms expressive of bodily organs are applied to God: mention is made of his countenance, Exodus 33:20, 23; Isaiah 63:9; Psalm 16:11; Matthew 18:10; Revelation 22:4; his eyes, Psalm 11:4; Hebrews 4:13; his eyelids, Psalm 11:4; the apple of his eye, Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 17:8; Zechariah 2:3 [sic, 8]; his ears, Psalm 55:1; nose, Deuteronomy 33:10; mouth, Deuteronomy 8:3; lips, Job 11:5; tongue, Isaiah 30:27; neck [sic, back], Jeremiah 18:17; arms, Exodus 15:16; hand, Numbers 11:23; right hand, Exodus 15:12; finger, Exodus 8:19; heart, Genesis 6:6; the "yearning of his heart" (A.V.: "sounding of his bowels"), Isaiah 63:15; cf. Jeremiah 31:20; Luke 1:78; his bosom, Psalm 74:11; foot, Isaiah 66:1. Further, every human emotion is also present in God; e.g., joy, Isaiah 62:5; rejoicing, Isaiah 65:19; grief, Psalm 78:40; Isaiah 63:10; anger, Jeremiah 7:18, 19; fear, Deuteronomy 32:27; love, in all its variations; e.g., compassion, mercy, grace, longsuffering, etc.; furthermore, zeal and jealousy, Deuteronomy 32:21; grief, Genesis 6:6; hatred, Deuteronomy 16:22; wrath, Psalm 2:5; vengeance, Deuteronomy 32:35.¹¹

Thus, it is clear that each human being is a symbol of God. The faculties of the human person reveal aspects of God and portray Him in the world.

But not only is each individual an image or symbol of God. The same is true of groups of men, of societies. God, after all, is both a Person and a Society, both One and Three. Notice how

Genesis 1:27 gives us both perspectives: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him [individual], male and female He created them [society]." For this reason, there is a symbolic relationship between the parts of the individual human person and the parts of the corporate "body" politic.

For even as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," it is not for this reason any less of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," it is not for this reason any less of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. . . . Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues . . . (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).

This social diversity also symbolizes various aspects of God's infinite person. Since Bavinck has done the homework for us, let us quote him once more:

Furthermore, God is often called by names which indicate a certain office, profession, or relation among men. Hence, he is called bridegroom, Isaiah 61:10; husband, Isaiah 54:5; father, Deuteronomy 32:6; judge, king, lawgiver, Isaiah 33:22; man of war, Exodus 15:3; hero, Psalm 78:65; Zephaniah 3:17; builder (architect) and maker, Hebrews 11:10; husbandman, John 15:1; shepherd, Psalm 23:1; physician, Exodus 15:26; etc.¹²

The World Reveals Man

Bavinck states,

Whereas the universe is God's creation, it follows that it also reveals and manifests him. There is "not one atom of the uni-

verse" in which his divinity does not shine forth. Secondly, Scripture teaches us that man has an altogether peculiar position among creatures. Whereas creatures in general exhibit "vestiges" of God's virtues, man on the contrary, is the very image and likeness of God.¹³

When we put these two truths together, we see that it inescapably follows that just as the world symbolizes God, so also the world must symbolize man, the image of God. And it is at this point that we can see the "cash value" of this symbolic world design. Man is supposed to image God; and to assist us, God has filled the world with pictures of Himself that show us what we also are supposed to be like as His images. By portraying God for us, the world also portrays the human ideal.

God is like a rock (Deuteronomy 32:4), and so should we be (Matthew 16:18).

God is like a lion (Isaiah 31:4), and so should we be (Genesis 49:9).

God is like the sun (Psalm 84:11), and so should we be (Judges 5:31).

God is a Tree of Life (Proverbs 3:18), and so should we be (Proverbs 11:30).

In this way the world models for us what it means to be a "symbol of God." At the same time, because of sin we often do not look at the world the right way. The Bible, however, will provide us with new eyes.

Conclusion

What emerges from this discussion is that if we want to acquire a Biblical view of the world, we shall have to make a study of Biblical symbolism. The way the Bible uses symbols shows us how to interpret God's natural revelation. When we see how the Bible speaks of stars, gemstones, lions, lambs, fish, trees, and thorns, we will be able to walk outside and appreciate God's world. We will also be able to see in the world pictures of human life and society.

Since a study of symbolism is so important, it behooves us to take a closer look at the nature of it, and how it functions in human life. To that consideration we now turn.