

The Story of the Unchanging God

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[0 : 0 0] Do you ever wonder why God created the world? In one sense, it's the question of a child, isn't it? A question, the kind of question we ask when we're young, one of those interesting questions that we ponder and ask grown-ups until we find out that grown-ups don't have good answers to questions like that and we become too busy as we grow up ourselves.

It can also be an anguished question, a question like that. And as we hear about the tragedies that rain down on our species or the evils that we inflict on one another, we might ask, why did God create the world if he knew it was going to end up like this?

Perhaps these days, where so many of us are trying to understand our identities, the question might occur in a more personal form. Why, God, did you make me? And why did you put me in this world?

And why do I feel so out of place in it? Theologians have another reason for asking this question, however. For them, it's strange that God should feel the need to create a world.

After all, if God is perfect, shouldn't he already be perfectly happy in himself? How could a created world add anything to his existence? As Paul puts it to the Athenians in Acts 17, God doesn't need anything.

[1 : 3 9] He doesn't need a creation. So why does he create? And theology has its own vocabulary to try to talk about this perfection and self-sufficiency of God. I've listed three of them at the end of the printout that you have.

Theology says that God is impossible. That is, he isn't moved or changed by events in history. He's already perfect.

Good things don't make him happier. Tragedies don't take him by surprise or bring him down. He's impassable. Another word is *azayati*.

It's from the Latin, *azay*, from himself. That is, God has everything from himself. He doesn't need anything from outside himself. He is self-existent.

And a more obscure one, pure actuality. That is, whatever God is or becomes, he already is. He doesn't need to become anything. He doesn't need to fulfill himself in any way.

[2 : 4 3] He is all he will ever be from all eternity. He is perfect through all time and space and beyond. Now, these theological concepts are designed to help us remember that God isn't part of our world.

He is his own world. He has his own community, his own joy. He doesn't live in our time and space. And yet, as we've seen over the last few weeks, God isn't just out there beyond time and space.

He appears within our story, doesn't he? He's written himself into the book. He sent his son to be the lead actor on the stage of history.

And within the confines of creation and its story, God does participate in history. He can be glorified or dishonored.

He's building a kingdom. He's going to inherit the nations, according to Psalm 82. He's going to live with his people, according to the final chapters of Revelation. That's why we pray, your kingdom come.

[3 : 52] Because we look forward to a time when God's relationship to the world will be expressed in a new way. That's why we pray, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Because we know that there's a part of creation, heaven, where God's rule is acknowledged. And then there's our part of the cosmos where it mostly isn't. And that's what Revelation 5 is about, the passage we've just read.

In the previous chapter, Revelation 4, John, who's having this vision, has just been taken up into heaven. And he's been given a glimpse of where God rules unchallenged.

He's seen God sitting on his throne, ruling the universe. He's seen the cherubim there, the same creatures we encountered in Ezekiel 1. He's heard them crying, holy, holy, holy, like the seraphim from Isaiah 6.

And he's seen 24 elders who symbolize the people of God, rulers who have crowns, but who keep laying them down before God every time they worship him. The picture here is God reigning unchallenged.

[4 : 58] The citizens of heaven freely acknowledge God's right to rule. Verse 11, you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

Yet as chapter 5 opens, things take an ominous turn. John sees God holding up a scroll which is sealed with seven seals.

And this scroll is a symbol of God's plan for the world. We know that for two reasons. First, the scroll looks like a Roman will or legal document, which would be sealed with multiple seals and would only become active when all those seals were broken.

It would become, in effect, legally. The other reason we know that that's what it's about is because when the seven seals are broken, in the next chapter, in the next five chapters actually, they trigger judgments and events which lead to the final redemption of the world and the end of history.

This scroll is God's plan for history. But the problem is that nobody is good enough or strong enough to take the scroll from God and open it up.

[6 : 16] Verse 3, Please notice the two controversial implications of this stuff here.

One, history is a story with a proper ending. And two, nobody on earth is ever going to be able to finish the story. These are both ideas that the world resists.

First, most peoples and cultures believe that history is cyclical. It goes round and round. It doesn't come to an end. Each cycle might have an ending, like the Battle of Ragnarok or the Age of Kali or something like that.

But that ending is just the beginning of another cycle. The idea that there might be an ending to history itself, it is a distinctly Judeo-Christian, that is, biblical idea.

But that biblical idea has also spawned a host of secular heresies. Having latched onto the idea that history might have a happy ending, people keep claiming to have found the thing that is going to bring about that happy ending.

[7 : 33] In 1806, the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel declared that history had ended with the victory of Napoleon at the Battle of Jena. Finally, imperial power and revolutionary spirit had come together to rule.

History had ended. Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler, of course, had their own visions of the end of history. Marx believed that history would end when revolution finally resolved the class war between the rulers and the workers.

Hitler believed that his Third Reich would bring together the glories of Rome and the Age of Charlemagne. Of course, all these predictions turned out to be nasty episodes in history rather than the end of history.

But people keep making the same mistake. In 1992, political philosopher Francis Fukuyama declared that global capitalism had brought about the end of history, a prediction that failed fairly spectacularly and embarrassingly nine years later when somebody flew aeroplanes into the World Trade Center.

Even today, starry-eyed optimists like Elon Musk tell us about the golden age that will result when we are all connected electronically to machines and to each other and we can upload our brains into computers.

[8 : 57] History is about to end with an era of global consciousness. It's all nonsense, of course. History goes on and will go on because people are people.

We are both weak and corrupt and insatiable. We can never be satisfied. We can never rest.

As Augustine put it, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. And so history can't resolve itself. Instead of coming to a happy end, it just goes round and round.

Humanity just keeps going the way it has been. God's kingdom can never come. And so John is filled with grief. The expression, weep loudly in verse 4 means more like, I was racked with sobbing.

But of course, that isn't the last word here. Verses 5 to 8. Then one of the elders said to me, Do not weep. See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed.

[10 : 05] He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals. Then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the lamb.

Each one had a harp, and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. So history does have a savior after all.

There is somebody who can bring about God's purposes on earth. Look at all the things these verses say about him. It says that he's powerful to defeat God's enemies like a lion, the lion of Judah.

It tells us that he's the fulfillment of all the dashed hopes of the Old Testament, like a fresh shoot from a fallen tree, the root of David.

[11 : 16] It tells us that he's somebody who can satisfy God's demand for holiness, somebody who can finally make the sacrificial system work. So he's depicted as a slain lamb. He's somebody who can rule God's creation without that making him a false god, somebody who has the right to stand in the center of God's own throne.

He has eyes and horns that are symbols of perfect knowledge and perfect strength, seven eyes and seven horns. So he knows what to do, and he has power to do it.

And the fact that he has eyes, which represent his knowledge, of course, are described as the seven spirits, or better, the seven's fold spirit, show us that he's the fulfillment of Old Testament expectations about the Messiah who will rule with divine justice and divine wisdom.

Isaiah 11 verse 1. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots, a branch will bear fruit. The spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

Of course, all this is about Jesus. Not Jesus as he is apart from us, utterly transcendent, outside time and space. This is Jesus in his human life.

[12 : 42] Jesus as a man within the storybook of creation. This is Jesus who enters the world as a helpless child and who grows up to be the king. This is Jesus as the hero who arrives on the scene just at the right time to save God's plans and draw together the threads of history and to rescue us all.

In storybook terms, what we are witnessing here is a heavenly view of history's climax and conclusion. Jesus has fought the enemy and won the day.

He's been exalted to heaven. And now we see the consequences of that victory. The happiness of the people who've been rescued.

The glory of the hero. The celebration of all that has happened and its consequences. In the rest of Revelation 5, we see that expressing itself in three acts of praise that move out like ripples from the center of the throne.

First, in verses 8 to 10, we see the living creatures and the elders around the throne declaring what Jesus has done and why he deserves the deed to history. Verse 8, And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the lamb.

[13 : 57] Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song saying, You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain.

And with your blood, you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.

So they're praising Jesus here because of the scale of his achievement. His blood, that is to say, his death doesn't just fulfill God's purposes and plans for the nation of Israel.

He saves people from every tribe and language and people and nation. His blood makes people from every tribe and nation so holy that we can return to our duty as representing God on earth.

A kingdom and priests serving God and reigning on earth. Verse 10. Jesus, in other words, undoes the fall. He puts everything back in its rightful place.

[15 : 05] He brings the earth back under the rule of humanity and he brings humanity back under the rule of God. But the praise doesn't stop there.

In verses 11 to 12, the news spreads to the angels. Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels numbering thousands upon thousands and 10,000 times 10,000.

They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders in a loud voice. They were saying, worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.

And then after that, everybody hears about it. Verse 13. Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb, be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever.

The four living creatures said, amen. And the elders fell down and worshiped. So here at the end, all the creatures of heaven and earth and sea worship and praise the lamb and God, the father together with one act of praise and prayer.

[16 : 22] And if you ever have Jehovah's Witnesses come to your front door, this is a very good passage to point them to. How can you separate Jesus from God and say he must not be worshipped and prayed to when here in heaven, people are doing exactly that?

Or if you want to say that he is an exalted angel, as you do Jehovah's Witnesses, why don't you at least do what they do in Revelation? If he's God's exalted representative, exalt him in the way the Bible does.

It's a great challenge. But this is what the end of history looks like to God. And it's actually what he has planned from the beginning.

So Paul in Ephesians chapter one, verse nine and 10 says this. God made known to us the mystery, that is the secret of his will, according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment, God's ancient plan for creation was to bring it under the head of his son.

Colossians 1.15, probably written about the same time as Ephesians says, pretty much the same thing. Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. We read in Colossians 1.15, verse 16.

[17 : 50] The world is made for Jesus.

All this time God has been playing a deeper game than we realized. We thought history was about us and solving our problems. But it turns out to be actually about God and his son.

The more we try to fix history and make it. The more we ruin history and muck up our own lives, the more we prove the need for Jesus. The more we try to fix history ourselves and fail.

The more obvious we make it that we need someone to bring us back to God and to rescue us from ourselves. The more we make a wreck of things, the better we make Jesus look.

Jesus is the only one who can end history. By saving us from our sins and bringing us back to God, Jesus becomes the one who deserves all the praise. Jesus is the hero, the prince who proves himself before God and before us and before his enemies.

[19 : 10] Of course, the book of Revelation has a lot more to say about Jesus' victory. And also talks about the stages of history that follow this declaration of its conclusion.

In the chapters, the five chapters that follow, as Jesus breaks open the scrolls, I mentioned there are judgments in the form of wars and disasters leading up to the final judgment and act of deliverance of God's people.

Later on, we see the same events described as a cosmic war between Satan and the people of God. And we learn that we too participate in the final defeat of Satan through trusting in Jesus and telling others about him.

In chapter 12, verse 11, it says, They triumphed over him, talking about God's people, They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Trusting in the blood of the Lamb, speaking about him, defeats Satan. But we've already seen hints of that in Revelation 5, haven't we? The living creatures and the elders say that we are a kingdom of priests, redeemed to speak words of praise and declare the work that God has done through Jesus.

[20 : 29] And we've seen the pattern of the spread of the news about Jesus from the throne outwards. The news that rescues people from every tribe and language and nation and which causes every creature to praise him.

We have a role in that too, don't we? That's the message of the Great Commission. And it's also a great challenge to us, I think, too. One of the most famous recruitment posters of World War I depicted a man sitting in an armchair with his family about him and one of his children asking him, Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?

It was an appeal to history. What were you doing when the great events of the world were going on? Where were you?

Were you in the trenches fighting against tyranny? Or were you busy at home doing your own things? Of course, in retrospect, that question works better for World War II than for World War I.

That was a much clearer contest between good and evil. But it works even better, in fact, infinitely better for us in the light of Revelation 5. The Bible tells us of a far more epic and serious and important struggle, even more than the defeat of Hitler.

[21 : 52] It's the struggle for the souls of people from every tribe and language and nation. It's the struggle for God's kingdom and rule. Of course, in a real sense, it's a struggle that Jesus has already won.

The climax has passed. The beachhead has been won. The slain lamb has paid for our sins and cracked the scroll of history. And yet what a privilege to be living in the wake of that victory, to belong to the final chapters of God's great story.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says that we Christians have the privilege of living in the culmination of the ages. It's as if everything that happened before happened for us.

Jesus strikes a similar note when he says that living in this stage of history makes our actions and persons more significant. When the disciples of John the Baptist come to him, he commends John the Baptist.

He says, I tell you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

[23 : 04] You and I, in other words, are greater than John the Baptist because we understand and get to participate in the conclusion of history. The story of Jesus.

So what are you doing in the great war? What will you tell the angels when they ask you that question in, say, 10,000 years? Maybe you'll say, I tried to tell my neighbors and friends about Jesus.

I encouraged my ministers at church and gave money to help missionaries overseas. I turned up to prayer meetings even on the nights I was tired and added my prayers to the bowls of incense around the throne of God.

Maybe you'll say, I lost my job because I said I would follow God and Jesus rather than the latest social fashions. Maybe you'll say, I strengthened my brothers and sisters at church by singing loudly and by trying to encourage them when they were down.

Or I tried to teach my children to love Jesus more than anything else in their lives and pray that they would take their part in this story too. I tried welcoming newcomers at church and tried to talk about spiritual things in my conversations with people.

[24 : 25] Maybe the things in this list, at least some of them sound ordinary or insignificant, but they aren't. They all matter because they all share in different ways in the end of history, the conclusion of God's great story.

We live, as Christians, as those who trust in Jesus, in a great part of God's story. We live in a great story and we're called to be great.

But of course, like in all the best stories, there is drama and danger as well. There's a risk of discouragement, of forgetting our place in the great story.

There's a risk of believing the enemy's propaganda, that Jesus is on his way out and that human reason and progress and wisdom are finally going to win.

There's a danger of putting our heads down and just living ordinary lives. So the best we'll be able to say when the angels ask us, here's I worked hard, I loved my friends and I tried to be nice to people. In the light of these dangers and these great privileges, I hope you've been encouraged by the three visions of God that we've had over the last three weeks.

[25 : 39] I hope you've been encouraged by Ezekiel's vision of God's transcendence and power and sovereignty and the fact that God has made himself known in a radically new way through Jesus.

I hope you've been encouraged by Isaiah's vision of God's holiness. And the news that God has made a way for us sinful people to be close to a holy God through his son Jesus and his sacrifice.

And I hope you've been encouraged by this last vision of God's planned feastry to glorify his son Jesus, to save us and make us part of the great chorus celebrating the lamb who was slain, the king and priest who saves the world and makes us part of God's great story.

Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise. To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be praise and honour and glory and power forever and ever.

Amen. Thanks. Thanks. For those theologians who really like to think about the impassibility of God, how he's not affected by anything, I wonder how prayer fits into that because I believe God hears our prayers and in my case he's answered them.

[27 : 05] That's why I'm here in Australia. And so I wonder how those theologians kind of deal with the fact that God hears our prayers and the fact that God's impassible. The answer to the question of how they would do it, I think a lot of them would say prayer is really for us rather than for God.

That is, from God's perspective, he knows everything that's going to happen. And I guess that's true. But I think the Bible also seems to put it a bit more strongly than that, that God actually does somehow enter into the flow of time and space without compromising his transcendence as well.

So the Bible uses quite strong language, you know, when he talks about him repenting of his idea of destroying the Israelites in response to Moses' petition.

Though, of course, we could also go back and we'd find out that this repentance did kind of, ended up fulfilling the predictions through Jacob of the 12 tribes of Israel.

So somehow both those things were working at the same time. But yeah, our experience is that God answers prayer. I mean, from his perspective, everything might be all mapped out in a kind of single moment, as the medieval theologians would have kind of understood it.

[28 : 38] Everything is accessible to God all at once. And yet, here we are. We're not up there. We find that when we pray, it makes a difference. God listens and answers our prayers.

And when we don't, he doesn't. So when we experience the fact that God listens to our prayers, we experience the flow of time. And he calls on us to live as creatures within space and time.

And he calls on us not to pretend that we are with him in eternity, but to acknowledge our place in his economy, I think. Andrew, a lot of the, I guess, highbrow theological terminology that you used, like impassibility and aseity and pure actuality, sort of came out of the Greek thoughts of, I guess, the Aristotelian sort of view of God, or this God out there.

Did the same, did any of the same ideas of God exist in the Old Testament? And, or were they sort of later discovered after, I guess, I'm just trying to think who it was, that went back and rediscovered Aristotle and rediscovered the Greek thinkers and sort of reinterpreted Christian thinking through a Greek lens, in a sense.

Yeah. Yeah, that's a really good and big question. And I won't be able to answer it properly. I think with a lot of these kind of things, yes, you're right, that these are philosophical terms.

[30 : 18] And in a sense, they don't quite map onto the Bible. And yet, there are correspondences in the Bible.

So, you know, the Bible is quite clear that God doesn't change, for example. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. I, the Lord, do not change, etc. It's very clear that God isn't taken by surprise by history.

It's clear that God doesn't need anything. We can find lots of passages that make that clear. If I was hungry, I wouldn't talk to you, says God at one point. That Acts 17 passage, saying the same.

So, yes, they are Greek-inspired and philosophical terms. And they're abstractions but the Bible is saying similar things in kind of more dynamic and relational ways quite often.

And I guess another thing that we might say is that, well, if you denied those terms, what would you be saying? If you said that God didn't have pure actuality, that he became something, that would, you'd end up with a very different understanding of how God related to history than the Bible gives you, I think.

[31 : 31] You'd end up saying that he was dependent on the world in some sense. Yeah. Sorry. It's a big question. Any other questions? It doesn't have to be from tonight.

It can be from the... Am I allowed to do this? The last couple of weeks? Andrew was so quick to say yes. It can be a question about anything in life. So, Andrew, I guess as a last takeaway, what would you say is the one big idea that ties these three visions of God together?

You should know the answer to that. Do you know? Well, the answer is always Jesus. Yeah, thank you. See? It's the Sunday school answer. It's the right answer. I can do a little bit better than that. That is, well, not better than Jesus, but I can say the big idea is...

The big theme is God's transcendence but his imminence in Jesus. So God... A lot of theology is about holding things in tension. God is both transcendent and he is imminent, present in the world with us.

God is both holy and inaccessible and accessible through Jesus. God is both outside time and space, utterly unchanging, and with us through Jesus.

[32 : 48] In the course of history. And he will live with us, especially through his son and by his work. So God's transcendence, utter transcendence, and complete imminence in Christ.

Well, I don't know about... Well, actually, I do know about a number of you because you've told me that you've found these last three weeks really helpful, as I have. And so we've just got something little to say thank you to Andrew, but I think it's appropriate that we show our appreciation by a round of applause as well.

Thanks, Andrew. Thank you. Fast enough. Could you just recap the different ways in which we might take part in God's great story that's centred in Christ?

So some of you would have got some of those down, but I thought it might be good for us, again, not just to keep it up here, but bring it down here, is to think about those ways and just spend a moment in quiet prayer and reflection on your part in God's great story.

And there might be something in which you are doing. Thank God for that. Ask his strength to keep doing that. Or there might be something that Andrew mentions now that you think, oh, I hadn't thought of that.

[33 : 58] That's something I want to explore. Then pray for God's help to do that. Does that make sense? So could you just give us a brief recap of some of those things and then we'll reflect on them.

These are, of course, only a kind of smattering of many, many possibilities. But I think the things I suggested were we could try to tell our neighbours and friends about Jesus, encourage our ministers, give money to help missionaries overseas, turn up to prayer meetings, even when we're tired, and add our prayers to the incense that we saw in heaven.

Standing up for and sticking to the truth that God says rather than the latest social fashions, even if that costs us in terms of our career. Strengthening our brothers and sisters at church by singing loudly, trying to encourage people when they're down, trying to teach our children to love Jesus more than anything else in their lives, and praying that they'd take their part in this story.

Trying to welcome newcomers and trying to talk about spiritual things in our conversations with people at church or elsewhere, and so on. Thanks so much.

Why don't we just spend a moment just doing business with God ourselves, just in the quietness of our own hearts.