

God In Three Persons, Blessed Harmony¹

Two passages in Romans describe creation. The first is Romans 1:18–23, which says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; ²¹ for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

Creation declares the glory of God (Ps. 19:1, which refers to ‘the heavens’), and Paul says that God’s eternal power and divine nature, although invisible, are displayed by God through the things he has made. That glory is what fallen humanity rejects and suppresses. In its place they—that is, we—have chosen to worship images of our devising. Yet creation has not lost its role as a means of revelation. It remains, with all its fulness, the Lord’s (Ps. 24:1), meaning it belongs to him as his possession and that it has not been ‘hijacked’ by any other power and that it continues to function within his intended plan. Of course, not all see this, or even want to see it (Rom. 1:18).

Sadly, there are many Christians who also have a negative view of creation, regarding it as defective and fit only for ultimate destruction. So there has arisen a view that says that that God will destroy the earth and we will spend eternity ‘in heaven’. Allowing for the fact that there is a lot of careless and imprecise language in all of this, including the use of 2 Peter 3:10–13, I must say that the view of creation as irretrievably infected with evil and requiring total destruction does not fit with the scriptures which insist that the goal of history is nothing less than the restoration of creation to its original role and place in the economy of God (Isa. 65:17; 66:1, 22; Rev. 21:1; etc.). The language of 2 Peter 3:10–13 to my mind should not be taken in isolation from such antecedent passages as Isaiah 4:2–5 where the issue is the removal

¹ In this study, I want to attempt to present a picture that has come to me by way of the work of Jonathan Edwards. First I should immediately insist that Edwards’ abilities far exceed mine so, far from this paper coming in any way from a desire to impress, it is quite the contrary; it comes from my being impressed. Second, since Edwards wrote in the mid 1700s, neither is this paper an endorsement of everything I have read of or in Edwards. His intellectual method was heavily influenced by ‘The Enlightenment’ of that period and, while others of his time found the works of Enlightenment thinkers threatening, Edwards found them to be extraordinarily helpful, not because he agreed with them at all points but because he was able to use the insights and to build upon them and, some would say, to exceed them. On the other hand, there is much in Edwards method that does not speak to us in the twenty first century. Two works have guided my own enjoyment of the topic: *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, John Piper and Justin Taylor, General Editors (Crossway, Wheaton, 2004) and Robert Jenson’s, *America’s Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1988). I indicate where I have quoted these books but I will not make general references to either of them.

of the moral filth of Israel, a sentiment repeated by John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11–12; Luke 3:16–17).

Creation is not ‘fallen’, though humanity is. Creation, while not fallen, is nonetheless affected by the fallenness of humanity, although the affect is not direct. Genesis 3:17–18 says that the ground is cursed by *God* on the man’s account. Cursing is part of covenant, as is blessing, described in Genesis 1:22, 28 and 2:3. In this context, cursing does not imply either bad language or irretrievable lostness; it implies the withdrawal of the capacity to fulfil the task which has been given. In the same way, blessing does not imply mere ‘niceness’ so much as the given capacity to be all that we are intended to be and so to do all that we are intended to do. So this leads us to the second passage from Romans, chapter 8:18–25:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

The reference to present suffering may be to the variations of opposition of which Paul writes later in the chapter (verses 35–39), but the immediate precursor is to the painful struggle against remaining sin (7:14–25). However, the issue is that creation is subjected to futility, hindered by *God* from fulfilling its full function, and it has been restrained that way because of the ‘hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God’. It should be stressed that this ‘hope’ does not mean simply a longing but an intended and set goal. The theme of hope in Romans is one which appears often, starting with 5:2, our ‘hope of sharing the glory of God’, and in 8:18 it is the hope of ‘the glory about to be revealed to us’. ‘*To us*’ might also be ‘*in us*’, but either way, it is plain that our future glory, with its attendant freedom (8:21) is directly related to the glory of God (see Rev. 21:10–11). The liberty of creation, which is determined by the full glory of the children of God, is linked to the climactic revelation of the glory of God.

How, then, do we understand the creation? Certainly not as an independent entity (‘Mother Nature’ etc.), as if there is the creation and it stands in some distinction from God. Given the animistic streak in sinful humanity, I need to stress that I am not implying either that creation is god or that God is somehow tied to creation. Rather, I am concerned to say that a full understanding of creation cannot be had apart from our knowing God. Further, creation cannot be fully known apart from its goal which is the goal of God. Creation is not static, nor even the stage upon which some drama is played out. Creation is intimately linked with history, what we call ‘salvation history’, because creation itself has a history and that history is more than a ‘past’, in which we can observe certain developments. So if creation has a history *which lies ahead* as well as in the past, then it has an end, a goal towards which it is moving. Robert Jenson puts it this way:

That the universe has an end, after which comes its fulfillment, is not to be inflicted merely by supernatural intervention. The laws of physics and the initial boundary conditions are such,

according to Edwards, that the world-system is inherently perishable; only so can it have a purpose beyond itself.²

This purpose is nothing less than the glory of God. Behind what we see (so Rom. 8:24–25) lies the incessant drive for worship and for the glory of God, and given a view of the council of God, such we have in Revelation 4ff., this is what we in fact see:

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. *Day and night without ceasing* they sing, ‘Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come’ (Rev. 4:8).

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him *day and night* within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them (Rev. 7:15).

There is the constant activity by the created beings and by the redeemed to give all glory to God. What is more, even the accuser himself is continually before God:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them *day and night* before our God’ (Rev. 12:10).

None of this is activism for its own sake but is the life and, in Satan’s case, the anti-life, of all creation. And it should be kept in mind that Satan is and remains a creature (Gen. 3:1). So why are these things happening? The answer is that all things are involved in this because creation, including we in the new creation, is expressing the truth of God and so the truth of itself.

If all things are moving towards the goal and this movement is the truth of God being declared, this does not mean that God is in some way captive to history (as I understand ‘Open Theism’ to be saying) or that God is in some way incomplete apart from his goal being accomplished (as I think Jürgen Moltmann may be implying). Rather, in his freedom God has so ‘determined himself’ that all things are restless until they are in total harmony with the truth of God, which means in harmony with the whole action of salvation history. Without denying the finished work of Christ, this gives meaning to the statement, ‘the word of the cross . . . to us who *are being saved* . . . is the power of God’ (1 Cor. 1:18). This means that all things are restless until they are in harmony with the final goal, which is the accomplishment of God’s purpose *for himself*. God does not merely know the future, so in some way violating his sovereignty and his freedom, but the future is *in him*, in his character and his purpose. *He* is the Alpha and Omega! So we are and will be ‘participants of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4).

If this sounds confusing, and the weakness may be all mine if that is the case, we must ask how else we can express it? I think we can do it by noting that there is purpose within God because God is not a ‘monad’.³ The revelation of God within the Old Testament is strictly monotheistic, so that all other ‘gods’ are validly ridiculed as helpless inventions of rebellious humanity (Isa. 41:7; 44:9–20; Wisdom of Solomon

² *America’s Theologian*, p. 37.

³ A single unit; the number one. In philosophy, an indivisible and hence ultimately simple entity, such as an atom or a person.

13–14; etc.). Within the New Testament, though, a bigger picture is shown, with the existence of the demonic behind the idols and the exposure of ‘the satan’, the adversary or accuser etc. of the Old Testament, as a malevolent ‘personal’ being.

There is also the revelation that God, the one God of the Old Testament revelation through Israel, cannot be understood only in those Old Testament terms. For instance, Deuteronomy 6:4 says, ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone’ or, as it has been traditionally translated, ‘The LORD our God, the LORD is one’. In what is obviously an allusion to this, 1 Corinthians 8:6 says, ‘yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’. As God he is Father and as Lord he is Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the spirit of God, his wind or breath, is, in the New Testament, shown in far more personal terms, so that even though the word for ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) is grammatically neuter gender, there is the occasional use of masculine pronouns with regards to the Holy Spirit (John 16:13–14; Eph. 1:14). Also, the Spirit speaks to the churches (Rev. 2–3), directs the apostles (Acts 16:6–7) and even cries, ‘Abba! Father!’ (Gal. 4:6).

Israel never questioned its monotheism but, given the revelation associated with Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christians were left with no option but to enquire how the one God of the Old Testament could be understood and described in the light of all that had taken place. Many of the attempts to do this are terribly simplistic, and all illustrations, by nature of the case, must fail (see Isa. 40:12–41:1). But some reasoning has been quite profound. Augustine (354–430 AD), for instance, saw love as integral to understanding the tri-unity of God. He was not, we should note, trying to discover the truth of God by means of the intellectual method so much as attempting to understand the revelation God has given and which he fully accepted. The Trinity was for him already a given:

One of the most creative minds in the history of Christian theology was Augustine. In *De Trinitate*, which may be his greatest work, he turned his prodigious intellect to the problem of the nature of the Trinity. He reflected upon this doctrine throughout his entire Christian life and wrote his treatise on the subject over a twenty-year period (399–419). In keeping with the Western or Latin tradition, his view emphasizes the unity of God more than the threeness. The three members of the Trinity are not separate individuals in the way in which three members of the human race are separate individuals. Each member of the Trinity is in his essence identical with the others or with the divine substance itself. They are distinguished in terms of their relations within the Godhead.

The major contribution of Augustine to the understanding of the Trinity is his analogies drawn from the realm of human personality. He argued that since man is made in the image of God, who is triune, it is therefore reasonable to expect to find, through an analysis of man’s nature, a reflection, however faint, of God’s triunity. Beginning with the biblical statement that God is love, Augustine noted there are three necessary elements in love: the lover, the object loved, and the love which unites them, or at least tends to do so.⁴

A small comment like this does not do justice to Augustine, but must suffice here. Augustine identified the Son with Wisdom and the Holy Spirit with Love and initially argued that the love we know and see in humanity stands as an expression of the truth of God himself, because man is in the image of God and so we would expect to see vestiges of the truth of God remaining in man. Augustine does not limit his discussion

⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 339. See also Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1994, pp. 257ff.

to this point (his book is huge!) and others have pointed out that there are major weaknesses in his approach (as he also recognised).

This does lead us back to the statement of 1 John 4:8 (and 4:16) that ‘God is love’. The full passage reads:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love*. ⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:7–10).

We should read the passage in full, since it insists that the *revelation* of love is the sending of the Son by ‘God’. But does that end the matter? Can we ask whether that is the end of the matter, or does the assertion that ‘God is love’ tell us anything of God prior to creation or, at least, prior to the fall? When added to other statements, such as John 17:5, 24, we can say that before creation the Father loved the Son as he continues to love him (John 5:20). ‘God is love’ does not therefore require that we limit this love to the redemption of sinful humanity. Also, Isaiah 9:6, which speaks of the promised child as being ‘the everlasting father’, applies to the Son not because he *is* the Father but, as the New Testament shows, the truth that God is ‘the Father’ and always has been ‘the Father’ becomes manifest at the incarnation (so John 1:14, 18; etc.).

So we should ask: What is true within the ‘one God’ of Israel if ‘God is love’? And what is true before there is any revelation of that love as it relates to us as fallen humanity? Put another way, is love static, that is, is it merely (at best) a positive emotional (would ‘affectional’ be a better word?) attachment of one to another or does it have within it the goal of the total good of the one who is loved whatever the cost to the lover? If we take the *revelation* of God’s love as definitive, then we must conclude that his love did not change when the objects of his love became fallen humanity.

The primary object of God’s love is God himself, not in some narcissistic way but, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the love of God is goal directed and also, because God is father Son and holy Spirit, his love is identifiable in ways appropriate to the particular ‘persons’ of God. So the Father loves as Father and the Son loves as Son, while the love of the Spirit (Rom. 15:30) is not that the Spirit is love as some sort of bond between Father and Son, but that he loves as only the one who fully communicates the truth of Father and Son can love. There is no fourth member of the Trinity which we might call ‘love’, there is only the truth that the Father loves fully and the Son communicates that love to us in his loving submission and the Spirit loves in his loving communication of the Father and Son to us, even as he serves them.

Humanity should not be considered only in terms of its ‘fallenness’, but instead should be first seen in terms of its place within the action of divine love. This is contained in such passages as Ephesians 1:3–5, where we are described as chosen in Christ before there was sin to be dealt with. Creation contains within it the truth of the goal and all that is in view from the beginning. Thus Paul tells us that the creation of male and female, and in particular their deep union, is the expression and anticipation of the deep union of Christ and his bride, the church (Eph. 5:25–32).

Goal directed love means that God has determined a goal for himself and so for all things he has made. Augustine’s confession expresses this:

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.⁵

This is, of course, true in the present, but is even more appropriate in expressing the vastness of the goal. Then all will be in harmony. This is the unity of God and so the unity of all things in him and through him. This is ‘the unity of the Spirit’ which has now come to us but which will then be known in its overwhelming fullness. In Jonathan Edwards’ terms, this will be a harmony, not merely an agreement. Harmony is musical, it is the complete flowing together of all the constituent parts, so that each contributes to the whole. Therefore this means far more than just the eradication of sin and evil, sweet as that may be, but the accomplishment of the goal of Father Son and Spirit; and, in terms of the language of the scriptures and in the light of the incarnation and atonement, we must conclude that this harmony is nothing less than the Father’s provision of a pure bride for the Son and that her purity will be commensurate with his, and that her delight in him will eternally increase because the advancement of God’s glory will necessarily involve the advancement of the glory of Son’s ‘body’, his bride:

‘The creation of heaven was in order to the work of redemption . . . to be a habitation for the redeemed . . . As to this lower world, it was doubtless to be a stage upon which this . . . work of redemption should be transacted’. Therefore the more precise Trinitarian statement is: ‘And as the happiness [of blessed creatures] will be increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more . . . perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father, and the Son’.

The ‘procession’ of the eternal Son, his reality as the object of perfect Love, is in Edwards’ thought given before there are creatures . . . Thus the identity of self-love and communicating love is accomplished already in God himself: ‘God is glorified within himself . . . (1) by appearing to himself in his perfect idea . . . (2) by . . . delighting in himself by flowing forth in infinite love towards himself . . . in his Holy Spirit.’ But that seems to . . . pose the question anew: ‘Why then, did God incline farther to communicate himself, seeing he had done [it] completely’ in his own triune life?

Edwards’ answer takes us finally to the center of his systematic reflection, to—‘as it were’—his notation of the universal melody’s fugal structure: ‘To this I say, that the Son is the adequate communication of the Father’s goodness . . . But yet the Son has also an inclination to communicate *himself*, in an image of his person that may partake of his happiness: and this was the end of the creation, even the communication of the happiness of the Son of God . . . Therefore the church is said to be the completeness of Christ.’ It is as and only as a factor in the plot of the triune God’s inner life, that God has a need to overflow . . . Edwards is beautifully simple: ‘The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ, that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love . . .’ ‘[H]eaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse.’ The church is *with* Christ the object in the triune love and so the purpose of creation.⁶

Also beginning by quoting Edwards, J. I. Packer expresses it this way:

And though the emanation of God’s fulness, intended in the creation, is to the creature as its object; and though the creature is the subject of the fulness communicated, which is the creature’s good; yet it does not necessarily follow that, even in doing so, God did not make himself his end. It comes to the same thing. God’s respect to the creature’s good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with himself . . . The more happiness the greater union . . . And as the happiness will be

⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, pt 1, translated with an Introduction by R. S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, p. 21.

⁶ Jenson, *America’s Theologian*, pp. 41f.

increasing to eternity, the union will become more and more strict [i.e., closely bound] and perfect; nearer and more like to that between God the Father and the Son; who are so united, that their interest is perfectly one . . .

Let the most perfect union with God be represented by something at an infinite height above us; and the eternally increasing union of the saints with God, by something that is ascending constantly towards that infinite height . . . and that is to continue thus to move to all eternity.

The two-way street of this unceasing process, says Edwards, embodies and expresses the true end for which God created the world: namely, the endless advancement of his glory, in union with us, through the endless advancement of ours, in union with him. Those who have in any measure tasted the refreshment and joy of heart that flow from faith in, friendship with, and worship of the holy Three (or shall I say the holy One, or One-in-Three) will latch on to Edwards's thinking here as a complete answer to any who fancy that the Christian heaven would be static and dull, and will themselves look forward to the awaiting glory with ever-growing eagerness.⁷

So if we return to the matter of creation, with which we began, we might do well to say, with another writer, that, in accordance with Isaiah 45:18 and 51:16, the triune God 'planned no meaningless and empty universe, but a home for his family'.⁸

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⁷ J. I Packer, 'The Glory of God and the reviving of Religion: A Study in the Mind of Jonathan Edwards' in Pier and Taylor, *A God Entranced Vision of All Things*, p. 94.

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary on Books I and II of the Psalms*, TOTC, InterVarsity Press, London, 1973, p. 67.