

Why Hebrews Was Written (Part Six)

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The apostle James boldly states:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. (James 1:16-18)

Despite a revived economy that provides steady incomes for many citizens, overall living conditions in the United States are not improving. It is not getting any safer to walk America's streets. The year is just over halfway expired, and the city I live in, Charlotte, North Carolina, has already exceeded the total number of murders it witnessed in all of last year. Charlotte has never been considered a crime capital, but it, too, has been inundated by the tidal wave of angry immorality that has engulfed America's conduct.

This article ties loosely to the previous one in this series, which was concerned with why Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, highlighted the spiritual value of "treasure." A treasure's value lies in its power to motivate its possessor to give it his attention to protect and increase it. Jesus did not tell us what He believed the treasure should be. At that point in His message, His focus was on what a treasure's influence did to stimulate its possessor to build and protect it. Even so, Jesus desired that His brothers and sisters in the faith possess a treasure acceptable to Him.

We will begin by considering a general overview of the current state of American culture. Without a doubt, this world's Christians are not practicing their faith with the same high level of culture-stabilizing fervency as past Christians have. In fact, modern Christianity seems to have been overwhelmed. It appears to be flat on its back, ineffectively flailing away at its many objectives.

The religion obviously still exists, but it has no vibrant strength to provide moral leadership. Its enemies' many victories in America's courts suggest a reason why Americans, in terms of behavior, are hopelessly mired in a milling mass of spiritually directionless confusion. They resemble people unsure of what they need to focus on to please God, regardless of what others do. Perhaps a simple answer is that most Americans do not truly desire to please God.

I believe that this uncertain conduct of members of "Christian" religious organizations is steadily eroding the fervency that Scripture expects of Christians. Sadly, Christian churches have become, in many cases, little more than social clubs containing nice people but not remaining steadfast and determined to glorify God through the righteousness that Jesus displayed and taught. The churches should be leading the way in glorifying God, but instead, they seem to be a "leading" means of confusion as to which way to go.

National Immorality

Those in whom God's Holy Spirit dwells and who have a growing relationship with Him can honestly and accurately conclude that the average American's heart is not set on pleasing God. Jesus

teaches in Matthew 15:19, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Do not sinful behaviors like these typify much of American conduct?

We see on television and hear on radio of the fruit of this nation’s sinful behaviors. American news reports are dominated by brief stories on criminal statistics, listings of crimes of the previous day, and the political warfare between groups striving to wrest control of the governing bodies of the nation. The behaviors we observe in religious groups are not significantly different from those witnessed in the irreligious world. Neither group’s recent record makes one or the other considerably more appealing in terms of a peaceful and safe environment to live in.

Overall, what we see in progress is a major disaster of national immorality. Americans’ immoral conduct is mounting substantially, growing ever more threatening to life and limb. In some regions of the nation, citizens who can withdraw from such danger zones are taking the opportunity. But where do they go? Across the board, America, whose standards of conduct were once higher than the rest of the world’s, is now thoroughly like the rest of the world!

The immoral conduct broadcast to us daily seems to be approaching what the Bible describes in Genesis 6. Genesis 6:5-6 catches the essence of life in those days:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.

This specific level of violent conduct has not been reached at this time, but we are moving toward it. To some degree, this increasingly perilous condition stands as an indictment against all of us because we have all contributed to this menacing situation. How? It is partly motivated by our collective lack of knowledge, understanding, desire, and/or will to seek God’s righteousness and pursue it as the Bible commands us to do.

Many secular-minded people severely question even God’s very existence, but God counters those challenges with a stern judgment of His own. Romans 1:18-20 states clearly that humanity is without excuse because God has made His existence known to mankind. As it is impossible for God to lie, it is a statement of fact: The proofs of His existence and overall governance are available in the observation of creation. Yet, no groundswell of Americans is searching for those spiritual truths.

Can today’s humanity change and practice a culture of morality superior to what we see in the world? Probably, because even this nation’s history shows an America with a much higher level of moral conduct among the general population. Within its histories of the Israelite peoples, the Bible shows a few instances of such a thing occurring.

However, the overall chances of reformation are slim because the Bible pointedly shows us that as long as man’s self-centered, anti-God nature remains driven by its resident carnality, nothing will ever change! Romans 8:7 dogmatically states that man’s carnal mind, the mind he develops from birth, is antagonistic to God. It is not subject to God by nature.

It has been this way since Adam and Eve. They sinned, bringing death upon themselves almost immediately after spending time in the presence of their Creator and being instructed by Him personally. This reality is evidence of how persuasive the anti-God nature we begin to take on at birth

is. That one of their children murdered the other provides evidence that the same nature is passed on to us, their children.

Immorality has almost always been the dominant way of life for mankind, not just for Americans. The early chapters of Genesis show violence continued growing until God Himself put a stop to it by bringing the Flood on mankind. He wiped humanity out entirely except for one family of eight.

Challenged by God

With the conditions we are living through as realities and the availability of the Bible as a resource, we are challenged to choose. God took this same approach toward ancient Israel, and His challenge remains in His Word to this day:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them.
(Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Since Jesus Christ walked the earth, history shows that never has any nation had such full and easy access to the Word of God as has America. Who then do we choose to believe, God or men? Even though God is not challenging the entire nation to choose at this time as He did Israel at that time in their history, the challenge remains for the individual citizen. If an individual sincerely desires to better his conduct before God and not follow the crowds eagerly throwing themselves into the pit reserved for those who do not want to please God, he or she can choose life.

The potential violence of immoral conduct across America deserves serious consideration and a positive response. Does our conduct follow the American pattern, or does it reflect Jesus Christ's teaching? Those two ways of life are not similar in character. The choices are clear. We have little excuse not to choose life.

What Is God Doing?

Not only is the reality of His very existence questioned, but humanity also does not appear to be thinking about what God Himself has been doing since creating man and His seeming lack of revelation and intervention to this present time. If a person sincerely seeks direction in his life, should he not be looking to God Himself? Is God actively moving toward the conclusion of a plan? Do we know what that plan is?

In a significant way, it is always helpful to consider such things from evidence provided by creation itself. The creation is so vast and filled with marvels of awesome creative and intelligent power, such

as massive stars that so far surpass our system's sun as to make our solar system seem an afterthought. In addition, the creation is filled with life, imparted to it by its Creator, that is different from human life. Angelic life, of which Scripture informs us, is another example of life far different from human life. Animals, existing in thousands of different species, are not only different from humanity but also different from each other in many respects. The creation includes vegetable life, bird life, and aquatic life—such impressive variety! How can some think that this creative Genius made all this without a clear plan and goal in mind?

Indeed, the existence of the creation does not in itself provide a specific statement to give guidance for human behavior. But should its glory not provide people motivation to seek out more knowledge and understanding about the personality and character of its Creator?

In this culture, people are drawn to seek out and imitate those they admire for doing what they consider to be “great.” Depending on the admirer's interests, the admired one might be an athlete, musician, entertainer, politician, even a religious personality. A reaction produced in the admirers is to make a significant effort to imitate the character and personal mannerisms of their hero. Considering what the Father and Son have already accomplished in producing this creation, why are people not giving enough thought to setting themselves to imitate Their characteristics? The lack of virtue among Americans is visible evidence that not many are thinking deeply about God and His purpose.

Living in this American culture, one is surrounded by a constant, invisible pressure to go along with its sinful attitudes and conduct. People are living busy lives, but where are they headed? Is it purposeful and in alignment with the direction God has planned and teaches through Jesus Christ? Are they following God in their busyness?

We must conclude that their overall conduct reveals that Americans are not thinking of imitating Him as Christians are charged to do in I Peter 2:20-22:

For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: “Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth.”

We readily see the evidence for this conclusion because what Americans think in their hearts does not result in ending immorality in their conduct.

American history shows that some of this nation's renowned Founders were sincerely religious, but theologically, many of them were Deists. They had some influence on the founding principles of this nation. Deists believe that God did indeed create all things, but partly because He remains unseen and seems inactive, they conclude that He then set His magnificent creation to operate on its own and walked away from it to observe the activities of mankind. Since He has a hands-off policy, they say, further labors on His part to improve mankind's behavior simply never happened. Though this is a simplistic explanation of Deism, it essentially summarizes its core beliefs.

Where does Americans' confused speculation lead a person in terms of governance of a nation, a business, or an individual's conduct? Is there any specific guidance from a Creator God as to the conduct He expects and according to which He will judge? Where does a conclusion to that question lead those who ask and answer it?

It is not true that nobody is thinking about God. On the contrary, many do think about God. It can be truthfully stated that Americans have been doing so ever since the nation was founded, though they have never had a central set of theological principles or authority to agree upon and use for guidance. A major problem, it seems, is that it is every man for himself (Judges 21:25). It is not at all like the ministry of Jesus Christ, during which He led the apostles unerringly through His conduct and message.

The manifold choices of which direction to move in seem only to multiply the individual ideas of how life should be lived. It leaves the individual stuck with what an obviously confused mankind has produced to this point in time. However, with greater numbers and intensity of troubles, the clear forecast is that only more of what has already been produced will continue to be produced. The moral and spiritual diversities will only worsen. Has man, of his own volition, ever shown himself capable of turning from the pattern of immoral behavior humanity has displayed from the beginning to follow God?

The good news is that the Deistic Founders were wrong in their religious speculations. We can state this with confidence because God has decreed that mankind is without excuse as to His existence and nature. Their conclusions were mere insignificant guesses drawn from human reasoning, not from the authority of God's Word. Jesus says plainly in John 5:17 that God has been active all along the way: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," a profound revelation considering this subject. Mankind is so focused in the wrong direction that it is not looking for help in the right direction. Nor have people shown much willingness to believe and apply what is readily available in almost every home in the nation.

Why Did God Create?

God did not construct this hugely profound and complex universe with all its laws, forces, energies, and life merely for His own amusement. He is engaged in a serious purpose. I believe, not only is there a Creator God, but He created with a specific purpose and plan to carry out His objectives. In His Word He tells us what He is doing. What would we think of the wisdom of a God who was merely "winging it" just for the fun of it at our expense?

He has a robust, reliable program, and He has never deviated from it. This purpose has continuously consumed most of His time and energy since He began working toward its fulfillment, whenever that was. He has anticipated every eventuality His enemies, including Satan and mankind, might devise. He is not one to let responsibilities go undone while He wonders what humanity will do.

His plan contains one element that is particularly bothersome to many humans: It includes seemingly unknowable time elements within it. This is trying to a person's faith. Time is of special concern to humans, partly because we are subject to death. Nagging anxieties build within us that life is slipping away from us without our having accomplished anything meaningful. Perhaps this anxiety exists in

people due to their ignorance of His purpose. And, once we do know it, we rue the fact that we have accomplished so little that is meaningful because we are so self-centered. We have wasted much of our lives.

Near the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish composer Victor Herbert put to music in the operetta *Naughty Marietta* a poem by Rida Johnson Young that expresses the fervent yearning of countless numbers of people since Adam and Eve.

Ah! sweet mystery of life, at last I've found thee;
Ah! I know at last the secret of it all;
All the longing, seeking, striving, waiting, yearning,
The burning hopes, the joy and idle tears that fall!

For 'tis love, and love alone, the world is seeking;
And it's love, and love alone, that can repay;
'Tis the answer, 'tis the end and all of living,
For it is love alone that rules for aye!

The thoughts are grand; the sentiments are sweet; and the object is, for the most part, a worthy pursuit. However, it still does not correctly answer this ages-old mystery of why we were born into this world so subject to thoughts about the passage of time and ignorant of God's stated purpose. Within the context of the operetta, the love proclaimed in the poem and acted out on the stage is merely romantic love between a man and woman.

God's purpose for this awesome creation is far grander. It is exhilarating to the highest degree and deserves all the fervent and steadfast devotion we can pour our thoughts and energies into. The astounding revelation of this great mystery is a major message presented in the pages of the Bible. It is so important to God, as well as to our well-being, that He does not allow the first chapter of Genesis to conclude without providing a statement about it.

Countless people have spent years of their lives searching for the answer to this question. If they would only believe what the Creator God Himself said in Genesis 1, they would begin to progress toward understanding that the problem is not with God but with man's unwillingness to believe and to continue to search out the details. This article will provide a simple, no-nonsense overview of God's purpose and plan, one that is not confused by technicalities of language that complicate the simple but marvelous wonder of what He is working out.

Early Clues

The first clue, as mentioned above, appears in Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."

Most people's thinking is almost invariably limited to what immediately follows, the creation of Adam and Eve. This concentration on them is natural, but it is most assuredly not the whole story of God's creative purposes. It is only the beginning of God's intention, a first step, as it were. His purpose is that we become as fully manifested in His image as He was when He made that

pronouncement and remains to this day. The Father and Son are eternal spirit Beings of awesome intellect, character, power, and purpose.

We find another clue to God's intention in Genesis 3:22 after Adam and Eve had eaten of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God says, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever. . . ."

Do we catch the full effect of what God says here? He says that from the beginning, He has intended that mankind live forever! He means "forever" even as He and the Son live forever. The tree, of course, was only a symbol, and its fruit would not literally impart everlasting life. However, from the very beginning, it was His ultimate purpose that, when His creative efforts are complete, those whom He created as physical human beings would live forever in His image. The creative methods God must employ to ensure that we will live as God lives are the most difficult and time-consuming part of His operation.

Genesis 17:7 provides further evidence as God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham, adding circumcision as the outward sign of the inner intention to be faithful to it: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you." For them to enjoy everlasting possession of the inheritance, they must also have everlasting life! No matter where we search, except for Christ Himself, no human yet has lived an everlasting life.

We have only progressed through the first seventeen chapters of the first book, and significant clues about what God has been doing and continues doing stand revealed. Do we believe them?

Everything Begins with God

We often fail to give much consideration to—and thus overlook to our detriment—that this universe is God's creation. It did not arise from nothing. It was designed, took shape, and was given life from within God. Equally important is that He governs His creation. He has overseen and administered it from the moment it came into existence. He brought it into existence in a massive procedure through His Companion, the One the Bible reveals as Jesus Christ, the Word. The problem is not that God has failed to communicate these truths but that *we* fail to believe Him or take what He says seriously enough to do something about His revelation.

The Creator God is carrying out what every living thing does, except for the angels, whom He also created through Christ. In His case, He is systematically reproducing Himself. He is expanding into a Family in His image to share what He is and does with others of His eternal kind. In one sense, the poet was correct: God is love, and His love is guiding the salvation of mankind to be part of what God is producing in those who believe.

Standing by itself as truth, this revelation is mind-boggling. However, when we learn of mankind's activities through the histories of nation after nation, we begin to grasp why it is taking so long for Him to accomplish His purpose. God's plans for the size of His Family and the level of godly character He must create in each individual are of such a high degree that lengthy periods of time are critical to the process. God does not want anyone to fail to achieve His purpose, as Peter reminds us in II Peter 3:8-9:

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Consider the initial size of the Family God is creating (see Revelation 14:1-5). Even for God it takes a great deal of time to bring a human to birth, allow him or her to mature while developing a mind able to understand life's realities and responsibilities, reveal Himself and His purpose, and finally bring him or her to repentance. Now multiply this by 144,000.

Sin is the primary element that has caused God's purpose to take so long. God did not create us so that we had to sin. He certainly created us so that we could choose to sin. Eve deliberately chose to take of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Her desire to eat of it was so obvious to Satan, it was as if it were "written all over her face," motivating him to ask that leading question in Genesis 3:1.

And Adam, watching this happen, failed in His responsibility to God and to Eve, not exercising His God-given authority, rightful leadership, and guidance of her. He was not deceived (I Timothy 2:14). He, too, chose to sin, making her an idol before God, and they both were ushered out of Eden into the world outside. God was not taken by surprise by their choices. Within God's creative process, a human being must overcome the desire to sin to reach the level of godly character God desires to be created within him or her.

Recall that it was God who chose Noah to build the ark and preserve His purpose for humanity. God chose Abraham from all the families descended from Noah. God confused the languages at Babel, motivating mankind to spread over the entire earth. God chose Jacob and rejected Esau even before they were born. God chose David, also of the progeny of Noah and Abraham, from whom the family line of Jesus Christ would spring. We can clearly see that as time moves forward, it is always God who takes the lead in pressing toward the completion of His purpose.

Under Jesus, this pattern did not change. He was still God though in human flesh. He tells the apostles in John 6:70, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He reinforces this statement in John 15:16: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you." He adds in verse 19: "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

God is nowhere suggesting that those He has chosen were any better than others. God chooses no one due to having earned His election by his good works. God Himself, we have seen, is the Prime Mover of His purpose. The earth and its people are His creations, and He has not entrusted appointments to further, spiritual creation to anybody except for Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son.

Open Season on Salvation?

John 6:44 contains an astounding statement delivered by Jesus: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Do we believe it? His words more than suggest that God is choosing people from the human population worldwide one person at a time!

On the other hand, human religion teaches that people are free to volunteer themselves to be “saved,” and God will accept them based on their desire. People sincerely believe that God is almost desperate to “save” people. If that is so, who is really in charge? From what we have seen, God personally devised, oversees, and works out His purpose through His Son.

As mentioned earlier, Revelation 14:1-5 reveals that the first resurrection will contain 144,000 resurrected children of God to work under the leadership of Jesus Christ. To whom will be entrusted the evaluation of their character? Do not the Father and the Son have the last word? Or will it be entrusted to those who volunteer in a moment of sincere elation but who probably have little idea of the immense value of the goal or the depth of sin remaining within them? Such people have little grasp on what is really taking place.

Mankind’s studies into the intricacies of creation reveal that God is a perfectionist in what He sets His hands to do. This creation abounds with the wonders of God’s mind. The same perfectionism extends to His spiritual creation. On top of that, have the people of this world not read in Revelation that, not only is God creating a Family in His image, but He is also forming a government to exercise worldwide power to His glory?

We are beginning to see the blurred edges of the scope of why God’s purpose is taking so much time to bring to pass. Creating character in His and His Son’s image is not something He can do in a moment, or as Herbert Armstrong used to say, by fiat. Those entering His Kingdom must be trustworthy to the n^{th} degree. That takes time to develop.