

GRASPING THE MIST

A Devotional Meditation on Bereisheet (In the Beginning)

Genesis 1:1-6:8; Isaiah 14:12-21, 42:5-43:10

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3, 12:1-13; Ezekiel 28:1-10; John 15:1-9; Philippians 2:4-11

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The Bible says God created everything, and then it leaves us to figure out why.

One way to figure out why is to identify the things humans have in common. We all want to be appreciated, and we all want to do something positive and significant, which means we all want significant relationships with others who provide the appreciation we crave and the affirmation that we are doing the things we hope to do. We also want to enjoy the good things of life, which means we would like to have someone to share that enjoyment with us.

This line of reasoning gets us closer to what God created us to be, feel, and do, but it doesn't get us any closer to *why*. What is the point of creation? Assuming there is a Creator who is complete within himself, what possible advantage could he gain by breathing into existence this universe filled with trouble, and people who compound that trouble?

Christian answers to these questions bring me peace, although they do not bring the satisfaction of complete answers that cover every contingency in an infinite universe. When it comes to the reason we exist, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 says this:

Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever.*

Jewish answers are similar. Like the Westminster Divines, Orthodox rabbis begin their search for meaning in the word of God, and from there provide answers like this:

It is obviously necessary to study Torah and be aware of how to fulfil its directives in one's daily life. Torah is Divine wisdom and there is no greater union with G—d than by the intellectual unity of study. Yet, "the deed is the main thing." The ultimate purpose of study is to lead to action – to mitzvah [commandment] performance – in fulfilling the purpose of creation, the making of an abode for the Divine in this world.†

This helps. It tells me that our Creator imparted to us our desire to share the good things in life with someone because he, too, wants to share life with someone. That means



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* Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism with Scripture Proofs, part 1, Presbyterian Church in America Administrative Committee, <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/LargerCatechismwithScriptureProofs1.pdf>.

† Rabbi Nissan Dovid Dubov, "What is Life's Purpose?" Chabad.org, 2007, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/108390/jewish/What-is-Lifes-Purpose.htm.

our Creator is not some esoteric, unfeeling entity, but a being who, however complete he is in himself, desires to magnify his completeness by sharing himself with others.

If it is true that nothing existed before God started creating, then we can assume he intended all along to create beings who would be able to comprehend him on some level. That means his creatures would have to think and feel and desire and act in ways that mirror his thinking and feeling and desiring and acting. They would have to be capable of independent thought, and also be able to create at some level. How else would they be able to experience the joy and fulfillment he himself experiences at having his creation operate in the way he intends? That is how his creation can relate to and interact with him.

There is a hierarchy of creation. God said everything he made was good, but it was only after he made living creatures in the waters and skies that he spoke to them, telling them to be fruitful and multiply. Fish, birds, and animals have an intelligence of their own that responds to the Creator, as any pet owner can tell you. It was us humans, though, who received the highest capabilities, because we are the only ones he commanded to rule over the earth and everything on it.

In order to have a fully interactive creation, the Creator must create beings with the ability to malfunction. They would have to be free to do as they please rather than as he pleases. In other words, the creatures have to be free to break creation simply because they want to see how it works and try their hand at running things.

That is how sin entered the world. We know that our adversary existed before we did, and that he was highly regarded in the heavenly realms, but he chose to grasp for that which he was not given, and that caused his downfall. Perhaps he could have repented and returned to God's good graces, but he chose instead to share his misery with as much of creation as he could. That is why he deceived our first ancestors, enticing them to grasp for what was not given to them. That is the heritage passed down to us all. We have the choice of continuing in the example of our first mother and father, or turning back to the original intent of our Creator.

We see this played out in the choices of the first brothers, Cain and Abel. Abel regarded God highly and sought to know him, which is why he gave the best of his flock as a sacrificial offering. Cain acted out of obligation, bringing what seemed right to him from the crops in his field. Abel was moved by his connection with the Creator, and his desire to honor him and draw closer to him. Cain knew of the Creator, but whatever relationship he had was not as dynamic as his brother's. Perhaps he regarded his connection with the Creator lightly because it had always been there in the background of his consciousness, but never moved him to do anything other than check the boxes at the required times. Thus, when his younger brother experienced the favor of the Almighty, while he received rebuke and correction, his reaction was to double down on his pride and eliminate the competition by removing Abel from his life.

The names of these two brothers explain their actions. Cain means *possession*. That's what he desired: possession of his own destiny, possession of his own definition of meaning in life, and possession of his place as the measure of all things. Perhaps, knowingly or unknowingly, he grasped for equality with God, as did his parents. If so, then, like them, all he grasped was his own destruction.

Abel had a different outcome because he grasped for nothing. His name means *mist* or *breath*. It's impossible to grasp a mist, and impossible to comprehend a breath, which is why the figurative meaning of the word is *vanity*. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes uses that meaning to describe existence:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
What does man gain by all the toil
at which he toils under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 ESV

The Preacher is saying that we can't understand the full meaning of life, but we can derive meaning as we live it in the context of seeking to know our Creator and live by his ways. Ultimately, that is the answer. It's a paradox, just like the pursuit of happiness. We cannot obtain happiness if we make it the object of pursuit, but we gain happiness as we bring joy and peace and good to all we meet. So then, let us stop striving to grasp the *why* of everything, but live as our Creator teaches and become the meaning he intends us to be.