

The Final Verdict



By Dennis Priebe

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Why are we alive? What is the meaning of life? Listen to one man's attempt to define our existence: "For what are we, brother? We are but a phantom flare of grieved desire, the ghostly and phosphoric flicker of immortal time. We are an unspeakable utterance, an insatiable hunger, an unquenchable thirst, a lust that bursts our sinews, explodes our brains and rips our hearts asunder. We are a twist of passion, a moment's flame of love and ecstasy, a sinew of bright blood and agony, a lost cry, a haunting of brief sharp hours, an almost-captured beauty, a demon's whisper of unbodied memory. We are the dupes of time" (Thomas Wolfe). Can we glibly shrug off his lament as the raving of a madman, or is there some logic to his plea? Is there any evidence for his claim that we are simply

dupes of time? Let's be honest. The scandal of Christianity is the existence of a world where violence, greed and pain rule; where brute strength and national wealth determine the destiny of nations; where an accident of birthplace determines whether one will grow up free or enslaved, comfortable or starving.

Christians insist that God rules over all and that He both cares about His creation and intervenes in it to accomplish His will. But the evidence cries out, No! Where was this loving God when millions were being slaughtered in the earthen pits and gas chambers of Nazi Germany? Where is He now while starvation puts an end to the wretched existence of untold thousands of helpless children? How can we possibly square theology with reality; a loving God with the horrors of existence?

We cannot solve this dilemma by the evidence of our senses. The scientific methods we commonly use to understand the world and our place in it will simply not work to bring together these opposite poles of good and evil. The only possible way to escape despair is by the most monumental leap of faith imaginable. We must believe in a story told us by a Being we cannot even prove exists. To make it even more difficult, this story insists that our dilemma can only be resolved if we recognize the existence of billions of unseen beings throughout the universe. The census has yet to be taken which conclusively proves the existence of even one of these beings. And yet if we reject all of this we will be forced to echo the words I began with. What a monumental leap of faith! Let us now regard the story told in a 3500-year-old Book, not as a folk tale or legend, but as reliable history, for which life itself is well worth risking.

I am asking you to believe this marvelous story, not because I can prove it to be true, but simply because this Book says it is true. I am asking you to order all your perceptions to be in harmony with the world-view outlined in its pages. I furthermore maintain that this approach, and only this approach, will allow us to avoid the ultimate scandal of Christianity—a good God who allows unconscionable evil to run rampant over this planet.

Yes, we do have an answer, but the answer humbles our intellect and confounds rational analysis, for it lies in the realm of faith. Do you understand clearly how things got from eternity to here, and more importantly, how things will proceed from here to eternity? We will now attempt, in highly condensed format, to scan the storyline, in hope that we can find exactly how our existence in an evil world makes sense in God's universe.

In The Ultimate Beginning

In the earliest of all beginnings, God had some exceedingly difficult choices to make. Would He create life or not? More importantly, what kind of life would He create? Would it be programmed like a computer to behave in

certain ways? Would it be an animal with instinctual behavior but no conscience? Or would the highest level of created life be very similar to God Himself, with moral sensibilities and the freedom for each individual to choose his own destiny?

God's choice was made infinitely more difficult by His foreknowledge. He clearly saw that to allow free choice would lead to the horrors with which we are all too familiar. Would He create robots, or animals, or beings in His own image who would almost destroy His universe? God knew that it would be better to create nothing at all than merely to create robots or creatures without free choice. He understood that only creatures with total freedom of choice could enter into the relationship He desired to have with His creation.

By endowing intelligent beings with total freedom, God would expose the universe to extreme danger. All His created beings could choose against Him, and thus doom themselves to self-destruction. If there is any sense in which God is responsible for the existence of evil, it is because He decided to allow free choice, with all options totally open. But I thank God today that He did not choose the other options, and that I stand free in God's universe to make my own choices, with no hidden buttons which some higher power can push to make my decisions for me. Even in the midst of evil and despair, I will stand free to choose another way, with no overriding fate determining my destiny.

Free choice is the most important concept in the history of the universe. It is the inviolable right of every created being, with which God will not interfere and with which Satan is forbidden to tamper. The answer to nearly every problem today comes back to the concept of free choice. Because the very nature of free choice is to be independent of coercion, any decisions made are the individual's own responsibility and cannot be charged to God. They cannot be predetermined or controlled.

So even though God knew that one angel would exercise the right of free choice against Him, personal liberty was so important that God made the decision to create intelligent life anyway. Once this decision was made, it would not have been possible for God to remove Lucifer from His creation plans. If God were to eliminate, before their creation, all beings who would choose against Him, would free choice be real or a sham? This most important principle would be turned into a lie, and God would be fully aware of His own hypocrisy.

How Would God Respond To Rebellion?

Lucifer made his fatal decision over God's plans to create man on this earth. Lucifer was not included in God's planning session, and jealousy filled his heart. His jealousy focused on Christ's position in the Godhead, and the net result of his dissatisfaction was open rebellion. As the rebellion matured, Lucifer raised questions about the character of God. He said that God was unjust and impossible to obey. The law of God was a natural target for Lucifer, for the law tells what God is like. If the law proved to be unfair, then it would follow naturally that the character of God is flawed, and He would be unworthy of worship and obedience. Perceiving this focus of Lucifer's attack is particularly important if one is to understand God's method of handling the rebellion.

Clearly, once Lucifer had exercised his right of choice against God, God could not solve the problem by merely destroying him. The only way to solve the problem permanently would be to allow the process of free choice to run its natural course. When the decisions of all members of God's universe have been finally made, then the book can be closed on Lucifer's great gamble. God's character and government must be vindicated by time and demonstration, not by force or authority. God allowed the misery of sin because of the worthlessness of forced obedience. He determined to protect freedom of choice at all costs. God did not prevent Eve from sinning, because He would not tamper with free choice. Jesus came to earth and died to allow men to choose freely once again. And sin will not end until Satan himself freely bows down and confesses Jesus' Lordship (Romans 14:11). This freedom has been very expensive indeed, but the survival of the universe is at stake.

The reason God has been waiting so long for sin to run its course is that He Himself is on trial before the universe. Are Satan's charges valid or invalid? Will the course of sin vindicate God or Satan? The Bible reveals that God has submitted His own character to the investigation and judgment of His creatures. The whole plan of salvation revolves around this fact, and it cannot come to an end until all charges against God have been totally disproved. "That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged" (Romans 3:4).

It was difficult even for God to explain to the angels the subtle though vital differences between the truth and Satan's charges. Even for Him it was more effective to demonstrate the facts than to explain them. This is why the Bible is so largely a history of God's handling of rebellion and His treatment of those who have been caught up in its consequences.

Satan's original attack was soon followed by an organized revolt, which quickly developed into a massive rebellion, as a whole planet began living under his system of law. The great controversy between Christ and Satan was in full flower, and God's handling of the rebellion was being closely watched by every unfallen intelligence. It surely must have caused amazement that because of the principle of free choice, God allowed evil to have free rein. Yet only this could prevent more destructive long-term evil.

This principle is the best explanation we have, to understand how such an evil world can coexist with a good God. Suffering and tragedy have come into the universe because of choices made by free individuals, and God simply will not overrule free choice. Because of man's choices Satan has become the temporary ruler of this planet. "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness" (Romans 6:16). Even the New Testament refers to Satan as "... the god of this world [which] hath blinded the minds of them which believe not ..." (2 Corinthians 4:4).

This world does not reflect God's ways at all; rather it reveals Satan's system of government and the fruits of his rebellion for all to examine. Satan is only being permitted to work his will temporarily, so that every individual can make informed choices between God and Satan.

The Crucial Demonstration

When Adam and Eve bought Satan's arguments, God set the plan of salvation into motion. The only hope for mankind and for God's government now lay in the intervention of God Himself in the human situation. The colossal risk of this plan was at the same time the very thing that gave it potential for saving the universe. The Saviour was not to operate as a superhuman deity, but instead would function totally within the limitations of human experience, in order to disprove or confirm Satan's accusations against the law and character of God. Satan now charged that it was impossible for any of the descendants of Adam to keep God's law. It was crucial that the Son of God be born into this world as we are born, in order to meet Satan's charge that it was impossible for fallen man to obey God's holy law.

An intensely interested universe looked on as Christ and Satan did battle on the very planet where Satan ruled as prince. Over the course of thirty years they watched Satan's battery of charges fall defeated, one by one. This demonstration culminated on Calvary, where Satan's last attempt to discredit God failed abjectly. There his battle for the minds of unfallen beings was lost. Now they had proof that God was wholly good—even unto death—and that His law was absolutely fair. Satan had truly fallen like lightning from heaven, and by killing the sinless Son of God he had now fallen from the all-important arena of the minds of unfallen beings. After Calvary, Satan knew that he had lost. From this point he and the fallen angels would forever be on their own, without a shred of sympathy from intelligences in the heavenly sphere.

Why Are We Still Here?

What a magnificent counterattack God had made against Satan's deceptions! Surely He could quickly tie up the few remaining loose ends and finish the whole problem of sin. But as a recent book title plaintively asks, "If God won the war, why isn't it over?" Indeed, what are we doing here, 2,000 years after the decisive battle?

Once again, we must remember that God's purpose in the plan of salvation is to finish the experiment of sin finally and unequivocally, while not violating the free choice of any individual who has ever lived. This requires an extremely detailed plan of operation, with all possible objections and questions and pitfalls foreseen and provided for. So we must conclude that not all questions were answered at the cross, nor were all issues decided. Certainly men and women on this earth had not made their final choices about God and Satan. And even the unfallen beings, although they had cast their ballots for God's government, still did not understand all of the issues involved in the great controversy.

For instance, Satan had always claimed that mercy and justice could not coexist. If God insisted on an absolute law for all created beings, then He could not forgive anyone who broke the law. This was the argument which was so decisively defeated at the cross. Immediately Satan reversed the coin, and began to argue that God's eagerness to forgive sinners proved that His law had been abolished. This new argument would take some time to be resolved effectively in the minds and experience of human beings.

In fact, Satan has had great success with his argument that God's law was abolished at the cross. Most of the Christian world now believes that the moral law came to an end when Jesus died on Calvary. Many teach that we now live only under the law of love, which is interpreted differently by individual Christians. Christianity is now seriously divided over the issue of God's moral law.

The great controversy has gone on now for two more millennia. Are we any closer to a final verdict in the twentieth century than we were in the first? What still needs to happen before God's government and a free universe can once again find themselves in perfect harmony? Could it be that the universe needs to know whether God's methods of restoration really work? They have seen that He can forgive sinners. But forgiveness has to do with God's attitude toward man. What about man's attitude toward God? That has always been a trouble spot. God has offered to bring these rebellious attitudes back into unchanging loyalty to Himself. Will it work? Can former rebels be placed on a new, sinless earth without risking a new cycle of sin and rebellion? God is even proposing to relocate a special group of people directly into heaven before they die. Can He safely accomplish such an awesome task?

God has chosen justification and sanctification as His methods of bringing rebellious man back into harmony with Himself. Justification works like this: Since the past cannot be lived over again, its sins can only be forgiven. So God acquits; by faith Christ's substitutionary death pays the penalty for our sins and removes our burden of guilt. Not only does God pardon us, but He adopts us into the family of God, so that we are no longer strangers but sons and daughters of the King of the universe. In addition, by the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit we are reborn. The old nature is crucified with Christ, and we become new creatures, with new desires and motives that accord with His will.

Sanctification is the process which follows in the wake of justification. Human character, which determines the acts of the present and the future, can be changed; so God provides the power which we lack to change motivation and action. Many people wonder whether God can accomplish these goals completely or if they can only be partly realized in their lives. Are God's promises trustworthy?

These questions bring the storyline down to our time. What still remains to be accomplished, in heaven and on earth, before God can completely finish the sin problem? I am convinced that God will not let the agony of sin

continue one minute past the time when the last issue has been decided. If He did, then He—and not Satan—could be held responsible for the suffering caused by sin. This means two things: First, that there is no celestial clock ticking off a pre-determined length of time available to the human race. The reality of free choice precludes any such arbitrary action by God. Second, not all issues have yet been decided, so it becomes crucially important for us to know as much as possible about those remaining issues and how we might participate in their ultimate resolution.

Phase 1 — Judgment In Heaven

Did you ever wonder what is happening right now in heaven? There is a judgment going on up there, but it is not at all like the caricature some have made of it. God is not poring over books to figure out who is going to be saved and lost. Jesus is not remonstrating with His Father to be merciful. Jesus and His Father are not adversaries. Remember God's posture at the very beginning of the sin problem? Rather than acting arbitrarily, God opened His character and government to the scrutiny of all the beings He had created throughout the universe. The judgment is simply the concluding phase of this process.

Once again, God is opening Himself up for evaluation; in a very real sense He is the One being judged. God wants

every being in His universe to be completely satisfied with how He arrived at His decisions to save some and reject others. Remember that the primary issue at stake in the great controversy is not the destiny of individual persons but the character and methods of the Judge Himself. Satan's great hope is to catch the Judge in an unfair act—an indefensible verdict, an act of favoritism. God must defend His decisions both to loyal beings and rebellious ones. So in this work of judgment, God is inviting all who care to look over His shoulder as He reviews the records and His own decisions.

Never forget that the issue is between God and Satan, and that God must refute Satan's charges. In this judgment, will God's character and His dealing with sinners be vindicated? When all the evidence is in, will every being acknowledge that He has judged fairly? The very desire of God for all to examine the record assures us of a positive answer. Without this final judgment no true end to sin could be realized.

Phase 2 — Demonstration On Earth

Now, what still needs to be accomplished on earth to settle major issues in the great controversy? Remember that Satan is still pressing his charges against the validity and practicality of God's law, and God still will not permit any answer to be given to Satan except through the avenue of free choice.

In order to press home his charges, Satan keeps an accurate record of every successful temptation. He won't let God forget one of them. His hope is to have power over those who claim to love the Lord, and thus to discredit the power of God to change character and behavior. "Are these people supposed to take my place in heaven?" he taunts. "Are these the ones who claim to keep the law of God? Haven't they placed their own interests above Yours? Will You banish me and my angels from heaven and yet reward these so-called Christians who have been guilty of the same sins?"

Jesus doesn't argue with Satan. He simply continues offering His power to those who love Him in confidence that soon there will be a clear-cut and final answer to Satan's accusations. The ultimate fact we must face regarding such accusations is that only pure, honest, loving people can bring credibility to God's character in this world. God has promised marvelous power to wholly committed people. When His people are ready to accept this power in its fullness, then the character of God will be shown to the world in the form of living examples.

Surely no greater distinction can come to a people than to be known across the universe as representatives of truth in the great controversy about God. It is our privilege to join with the loyal angels in telling and living the truth about God, and demonstrating it more clearly than it has ever been seen before.

Our world has been so thoroughly deceived by Satan's accusations that only a faultless demonstration in flesh and blood will prove the authenticity of God's claims. We have been invited to be living examples that God's grace can indeed ennoble men and women. Only flesh and blood—mine and yours—can prove that the gospel is more than a theory!

Satan is counting on the fact that most people in this world prefer his way of life, where self is the first consideration in making day-to-day decisions. Even many professed Christians demonstrate by their habits of anger, bitterness, jealousy, fear and despair that they are more in harmony with his laws than God's laws. If God can transform these weak, sinning members of the human family into constant, obedient children because they love Him, what counter-evidence will Satan be able to offer? The combination of living evidence with the spoken word is the unanswerable testimony that will finally silence Satan, the prosecutor; and vindicate God, the defendant, in this cosmic courtroom drama.

Thus the Christian today seeks to live a holy life—not so God will think better of him, but so the world will think better of the God they see through him. The Christian detests sin in his life, not because he fears that God will think less of him, but because he fears that his friends will think less of God because of his sins. God's final generation will be so sure of His acceptance of them that they are set free to live entirely for Him. Their consuming desire is for their wonderful God to be made known to the world. They have decided that they are finished rebelling. They find sin to be repulsive because Jesus has given them a new set of values, along with the power to live up to those values. They become part of God's ultimate answer to Satan's charges.

These individuals will provide indisputable evidence that God has not asked too much from His created beings when He asks for obedience to His law. The reflection of Christ's character in His obedient people speaks eloquently that God's law has not been unfair, and that God offers freedom when He asks for obedience. As one writer put it, "the honor of Christ" stands "complete in the perfection of the character of His chosen people." The closing chapter in the plan of salvation—the end of sin—will occur when this conclusive vindication of God's government becomes a reality.

In the triumph of Christ over Satan at the cross, we see the master strategy of God's counterattack against Satan, which assured the eventual banishment of sin from the universe. The last battle, however, will be won by Christians girded with the strength of their Master. This demonstration vindicates God's claims and allows Him to bring sin to a final end.

Phase 3 — The Ultimate End Of Rebellion

The next step in our story, the reviewing of the records by the redeemed during the millennium, is simply to allow the human race to look over God's shoulder in order to understand His decisions, as He allowed the unfallen beings to do during the investigative judgment. And at the end of the millennium, the whole unsaved world will assemble before God's throne for the same purpose. One conclusive point must be clearly made. All, including the unsaved, will understand why Satan and sin must be destroyed. This final acknowledgement of God's justice and love will utterly vindicate God's name. All will see that sin is without excuse or reason, and that obedience is the only way of life and happiness.

Only by this protracted, painful, twisting process can sin be brought safely to an end while preserving freedom of choice for every being. This freedom is the kingpin of God's master plan for the universe. Why is freedom so important? Because without the liberty to reject God, neither could we choose Him—and without choice, love

would be utterly impossible. God loves His creatures, and a lover yearns for love in return. An eternity of growing into love with our Maker will open still wider vistas of freedom, greater possibilities of accomplishment than we can ever know here in this darkened world.

We should now be making the choices that will preserve our freedom for all eternity and vindicate the character of the God who loves us so much that He risked everything—in order that we might freely share it all with Him.

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