

Is the Chief End of Man My Pleasure or God's Glory?

Acts 17:16-21; 1 Chronicles 16:29

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What is the chief reason and purpose for your creation and existence? The Westminster Shorter Catechism faithfully answers: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." This truth is summarized in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament: Proverbs 16:4; Philippians 1:21. Not only does the salvation of man glorify God's grace and mercy, but even the rebellion and judgment of the wicked glorifies God's righteousness and justice. The creation of man does not reveal some need in God for fellowship (there was perfect fellowship among the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity from eternity). The creation of man and all things reveals a holy design to reflect the glory of His greatness, His majesty, His wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth in His creation. To glorify God does not mean that we can add anything more to the glory of God, who is already infinitely glorious. To glorify God means to reflect His glory since we cannot add to it—whether the stars in heaven (Psalm 19:1), or the sinner that is saved by grace (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). That is God's chief design for our creation and our salvation. God does not exist for us and our glory—we exist for Him and His glory!

There is nothing more important in this universe, in this world, in this nation, in the church, in your family, or in your life than the glory of our Triune God. Since the chief end of man is to glorify God, the chief sin that leads to all other sins is not to glorify God—whether by our neglect or our refusal to reflect His glory in our heart, thoughts, plans, words, deeds, work, relationships, recreations, and worship.

That is quite the opposite from what we are brainwashed to believe from the world, which tells us the chief purpose of life is to find what pleases you and makes you happy. That is why there are so many conflicts in marriages and so many divorces—it's all about our happiness not God's glory. Is even our happiness more important than God's glory? If so, then God's chief end is our glory—which is utter blasphemy.

Sadly, even so much of what one will hear coming from pulpits in professing Christian Churches this Lord's Day will not be about glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ first and foremost, but rather about reaching your full potential as a person, becoming successful, and enjoying life. There is certainly much in Scripture about joy, about peace of mind, about diligence in business, and about loving family relationships. But dear ones, those are all subordinate designs in the Christian life, which we will not realize if we are not consumed with our chief end—to glorify God. Even worship is not chiefly designed for your blessing and edification, but is chiefly designed to glorify God in worshipping Him as He has ordained in His Word. Preaching is not for the glory of the minister or hearer, but for the glory of God. Blessing, joy, and edification flow forth as the results of giving to our Triune God the glory, the praise, the holy fear, and our entire life to Him as a living sacrifice which He deserves. Life in general, and worship in particular are not about us—it's all about God. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are: (1) The Chief End of Man (Acts 17:16-18); (2) The Power of Novelty (Acts 17:19-21).

I. The Chief End of Man (Acts 17:16-18).

A. Although Paul and Silas were chased out of Thessalonica and Paul was driven out of Berea by the agitation of unbelieving Jews in stirring up the people of those cities against them, nevertheless the Kingdom of Jesus Christ advanced as some in Thessalonica and many in Berea were brought to faith in Jesus Christ through the effective preaching of the gospel and through the effective hearing of the gospel.

1. God will not take a backseat to devilish persecution or trials and afflictions, but the Lord continues to steer His Kingdom onward and forward (whether with apostles, or with you and me in the family, church, or nation). In fact, growing His Kingdom in such circumstances of trial than success without trial is in a sense a greater display of His power and glory—the Lord receives all glory—all boasting is in Christ.

2. Paul was apparently the primary target in the uprising in Berea and was sent secretly sent away, but Silas and Timothy remained in Berea for a while to strengthen these new converts to Jesus Christ (Acts 17:14). Paul was escorted by brethren due south to Athens, and before these brethren could depart from Paul and return to Berea, Paul commanded them to tell Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible (Acts 17:15).

B. While Paul waited for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him, he passed through the renowned city of Athens, but was filled with a righteous indignation as he beheld how fully the city was given over to idolatry (Acts 17:16—*paroxunō*—verbal form of same word used in Acts 15:39).

1. Athens was considered the cultural, educational, philosophical, architectural capital of the world at that time. Many traversed hundreds of miles to make a pilgrimage to Athens to behold its beauty, to admire its institutions, and to sit at the feet of men like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (who lived in previous centuries to that of Paul). This was the world's spectacle of what was finest and grandest to offer by way of a civilized and cultural city. But Paul was not impressed with any of that—all that truly mattered to Paul was that the city was totally filled with idolatry and it agitated his conscience greatly. He did not think of the people's sincerity to their religions. He did not think that it was better to have some form of religion than no religion at all. He did not admire the aesthetic value and craftsmanship of the temples and the images to their gods. He was provoked and stirred up at a city that had such a reputation for earthly glory, but had buried the glory of God in all of its idolatry.

2. What was it about idolatry that so incensed Paul? They robbed the Triune God of the Bible of His divine glory and majesty. Paul was not vexed for his own sake. He was not offended on his own account. He was vexed and offended for the Lord's sake. The honor, glory, and reputation of the Lord God Almighty were perverted by idolatry. Idols and images lie about the nature of God (Habakkuk 2:18-19; Romans 1:22-25). The same is not only true of pagan idolatry, but also true of the idolatry practiced by the Church of Rome and all churches that confine the glory of God to images, pictures, films etc. contrary to the Second Commandment ("Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" of any Person of the Holy Trinity, Exodus 20:4). All images of God rob God of His glory—they are lies that hide and pervert the truth that Jesus was God's only begotten Son (John 1:14). Dear ones, all that we honor, love, and serve before God is idolatry (the approval of man, self-righteousness, money, power, success, pleasure, family and friends, etc.). Idolatry is glorifying the creature rather than God and is the root sin that leads to all other sins—abortion, sexual immorality, etc. The answer to idolatry is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. What is it about sin and transgression of God's law that vexes you the most (whether it is abortion, pedophilia, hypocrisy, cruelties of the Islamic State, idolatry, false teachers that mislead many, etc.)? Is it that you or others are hurt? Is it that it brings God's judgment upon many? Those may be sound reasons to be vexed by sin and transgression of God's commandments, but the chief reason should be that God in all of His glory, holiness, power, and goodness is offended. What offends God ought to offend you and me—even our secret and hidden sins. You say, "Who's going to know?" God knows. That question reveals how little we understand about the glory of God. This was what offended Paul—God was offended and His glory perverted by idolatry. There is always a danger of allowing ourselves to become comfortable with idolatry or any sin simply because it is so widespread. The righteous soul of Lot was vexed by the wickedness of Sodom (2 Peter 2:7-8), and yet he lingered there (Genesis 19:16), and he exposed himself and his family to all manner of idolatry and filth.

C. Because of the overwhelming influence of idolatry in Athens, “Therefore” Paul made testimony for the Lord God within the synagogue first and then with whomever would talk with him in the market (Acts 17:17).

D. While Paul is discoursing in the marketplace (the agora, or central square where were located not only markets, but the legislative buildings as well), two groups of the most influential philosophies in Athens at that time engage Paul in discussion: the Epicureans and the Stoics. What do we know about these two different branches of Greek philosophy?

1. **The Epicurean school** was founded by Epicurus (who died about 270 b.c.).

a. Epicureans were materialists (i.e. they believed that nothing exists except matter and the movement of atoms within matter—like most atheists today). There is no immaterial soul or spirit—no plan or design to the movement of atoms—everything happens by chance—death ends all existence. Their chief doctrine was that the end and design of life was to maximize your pleasure and to minimize your pain. In a letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus wrote:

Wherefore we call pleasure the Alpha and Omega of a blessed life. Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing.

b. The philosophy of Epicurus is summarized in Paul’s statement (1 Corinthians 15:32) where Paul argues that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then “let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.” Much of this philosophy pervades our society and is encapsulated in statements like—“Grab for all the gusto you can, because you only go around once”—“Carpe deim” or “Seize the day”—“Think and act in the interests of your own happiness and dreams.” It is essentially promoting “the me first” culture in which we live (an idolatry and worship of self). The chief end of man for Epicureans is the happiness of man.

2. **The Stoic school** was founded by Zeno (who died about 262 b.c.). Epicurus and Zeno were contemporaries and their schools were rivals one to another.

a. The Stoic school were pantheists (all of reality is god, all of nature is god, god is not simply in nature—god and nature are identical). Therefore, all that happens in the world, happens within the fatalistic will of this impersonal reason in nature.

b. According to Stoics the chief end of man is a rational acceptance of all that nature brings to pass. Don’t fight it. Don’t resist it. Become indifferent to either pleasure or pain. Gain a mastery of all emotions, and independence from all circumstances, so that you might live a harmonious life, in conformity with the perfect order of the universe.

c. The Stoic school is characterized by, “Whatever happens is for the best”, and “Whatever happens will happen”. “*Que sera, sera*, whatever will be, will be.” The antidote for man’s woes was to limit his wishful thinking about the future, and focus on the present by way of steadfast engagement to present duties. It is the present that is important not some future hope.

3. Whether Epicurean or Stoic, the chief end of man was focused upon man (whether his pleasure or his acceptance of fate). Neither school believed in a personal, eternal, spiritual, infinite, unchangeable God that eternally exists in three divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the same in substance, equal in power and glory forever. Neither school believed man needed a Savior from sin outside himself/herself. Neither school believed in the bodily resurrection—that was all folly to them. Thus, they mocked Paul and called him a “babbling” (literally, a seed picker, a term of contempt for one who picked an idea from this religion and another idea from that religion, etc.) because he preached unto them strange gods—namely, Jesus and His resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:18). Paul preached the Lord Jesus is his reason for living and the resurrection is his future hope (Philippians 1:21). What is your reason and purpose for

living? If it is anything in this world, you will lose it at death. Only when Jesus is your reason for living will you gain at death.

a. Even Paul had people laugh at him and mock the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These Greek philosophers were so filled with themselves as the chief end of their existence that they could not hear nor receive the truth about their idolatry, their sin in offending a holy God who created them, their need of a Savior to escape condemnation, a Savior who suffered God's wrath for sinners who will believe and was raised from the dead to confirm His victory over sin, death, and hell (1 Corinthians 1:20-21). Why would God choose what the "wise" of this world considers foolishness and nonsense? That He alone might be glorified and exalted as our Savior alone—that His glory alone might be our chief end (1 Corinthians 1:29-31).

b. And yet, dear ones, we continue to rob our God of His glory by our boasting, pride, arrogance, seeking our own pleasure first and foremost, and looking within ourselves to find the strength to face one trial after another. This is embracing Epicurean and Stoic philosophy rather than biblical Christianity that looks outside ourselves to faith alone Jesus Christ alone as our salvation and worthy alone of all glory, honor, power, and dominion. Is this what is most important to you when you eat and drink, when you go to work, when you arise to make breakfast for your family, when you face pain, affliction, sorrows, lack of work, broken relationships, conflicts in your marriage, persecution for your faith in Jesus Christ? What is more important to you than glorifying God? That is your idol that must be destroyed through the death and resurrection of Christ. If we can't explain how what we read, watch, or listen to glorifies God, then why are we doing it (1 Corinthians 10:31)?

II. The Power of Novelty (Acts 17:19-21).

A. Paul is taken by the Epicureans and the Stoics unto Areopagus in Acts 17:19 (which literally means, Ares hill—Ares is the Greek god of war as is Mars in the Roman pantheon). This was not simply a location, but a council which met on that hill to supervise what was taught in the city. The Areopagus was taken up with hearing and considering that which was novel and new (Acts 17:20-21). They were attracted to that which was new—the latest theory, idea, and development from the mind of man. How persuasive is that which is new in the minds of many?

1. It is not truth so often that man seeks, but that which is new, that which breaks away from that which is firmly established as truth by God in the world He has created and in the Holy Scriptures. The Scripture warns us against those who are given to change ("Meddle not with them that are given to change" Proverbs 24:21). Innovators and inventors in technology, energy, medicine, engineering, etc. are great, but innovators and inventors in doctrine, worship, and church government are not—avoid them (Romans 16:17).

2. The Lord calls us not to pursue that which is new and novel, but to walk the proven old paths that God has revealed to us in His Word and that our faithful forefathers have summarized for us in our Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and Covenants. (Jeremiah 6:16). God calls us not to move the landmarks of our faithful forefathers in doctrine, worship, and church government (Proverbs 22:28). This is not making historical testimony equivalent in authority to Scripture—it is simply walking in the faithful footsteps of the flock wherein their walk was agreeable to Holy Scripture. Rome places oral tradition equal in authority to Scripture—whereas Scripture for us always remains supreme in authority, but even Scripture calls us not to novelty but to faithfulness in that which has gone before us. It is not some new innovation in worship, evangelism, or doctrine that will bring sinners to Christ—it is the same old, beloved gospel of Jesus Christ that yet reaches down to save guilty sinners by the power of the Holy Spirit.

B. Dear ones, the chief end of man is not what pleases you or what makes you happy or that which is most comfortable or easiest in this life. That which glorifies God and reflects His glory is not that

which is new or novel, but that which is old and ancient. Jesus does not encourage us to take the path upon which most of the world travels—it's easier, and it faces less opposition and adversity from others, but it leads to destruction. That which glorifies God (according to Jesus) means denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Christ (Matthew 16:24); it means being willing to part with that which is of value to you in this life and following Jesus Christ (plucking out the eye, cutting off the hand, and cutting off the foot, Matthew 18:8-9). Our chief end as Christians is not to do what is pleasing for ourselves, but that which pleases our Creator and Savior. A holy life in gracious and loving obedience to God's commandments is the way of joy, peace, contentment. The way of suffering for Christ is the way of reigning with Christ. The chief end that the world pursues is all about man. The chief end of man from the God who made us is to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

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