

PART 2

God's Design at Creation for Flourishing

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see God's design for how mankind is to live and function—our vocation. Adam and Eve were made to flourish and to bring flourishing to the world around them. This design was God's glory. When they sinned this vocation was broken and distorted, but God's intention did not change. It remained the same.

In this section, we will look at six essential components of God's remarkable design for all mankind. They address the basic worldview questions about life: Is there a spiritual reality? If so, what is it? What does it mean to be human? What is our relationship to the natural world? What is our purpose? Why are we here? I believe these are the foundational building blocks of a flourishing life and society.

1. Made to Flourish

As we all experience sooner or later, life is filled with hardship. A good friend is diagnosed with brain cancer. A family faces unemployment. A business owner loses one too many sales. A community fights a life-threatening virus. A nation struggles with rampant corruption and poverty. These kinds of things are par for the course.

And yet, somehow, we sense that this is not how life is supposed to be. Something is wrong. We not only *want* life to be better, we think it *should* be better. Why?

Looking at the book of Genesis, we discover that we have been created to flourish. To flourish means to grow well and thrive. It speaks of vigorous growth, productivity, and bearing fruit. A flourishing plant is full of rich color, beautiful flowers, wonderful fragrance, and delicious fruit.

Human flourishing, in turn, concerns how individuals and communities can develop and live in the most healthy and productive ways. It is not limited to economic gain and material progress. God's intent for flourishing covers every part of life—work, rest, entertainment, relationships, marriage, sex, family, church, food, hobbies, and vacations. Nothing is excluded. Everything is part of God's intent for flourishing and, therefore, is sacred.

In its fullest sense, the word *flourishing* is akin to the Hebrew word *shalom*. Translated *peace* in the Old Testament, *shalom* occurs more than 250 times. The general meaning of the root word is *of entering into a state of wholeness and unity, a restored relationship*. It also conveys a wide range of nuances: fulfillment, completion, maturity, soundness, wholeness, harmony, tranquility, security, well-being, welfare, friendship, agreement, success, and prosperity.¹

Psalm 1 describes flourishing in this way: “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” This is stated again in Jeremiah 17:8: “They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

As these verses indicate, flourishing is not the same as avoiding difficulty. Helen Keller was blind and deaf, yet by her own account she lived a full and fruitful life. George Washington Carver was born into slavery, became an orphan at a young age, and faced prejudice and discrimination that delayed and almost halted his education. Yet he flourished, becoming one of the world’s most productive scientists.

One of my heroes is Raquel. She lives in a poor community outside of Lima, Peru. Raquel worked all her life as a housekeeper, earning very low pay. Yet today all her children are educated, successful adults and her home is one of the nicest in the neighborhood. With all her difficulties, how did this happen?

1 Efraim Goldstein, “A Study on Biblical Concepts of Peace in the Old and New Testaments” (Jews for Jesus, 1997), <https://jewsforjesus.org/publications/newsletter/december-1997/studyonbiblical>.

God made us to flourish—to grow and prosper—to live *shalom!* He desires this blessed state for us, and he desires it for the world.

In Genesis 1 God creates the world and everything in it. He makes the land to *produce* vegetation, plants, and trees that *bear fruit* and *multiply* or *increase*. Creating fish, birds, and land animals, God blesses them and says, “*Be fruitful and increase* in number and *fill* the seas and the earth” (emphasis added). This opening chapter of the Bible shows how God has wired growth and fruitfulness right into creation.

God creates his world to be a really good place. After each act of creation, God steps back and sees that *it is good*. We read, “God called the dry ground ‘land,’ and the gathered waters he called ‘seas.’ And God saw that it was *good*.”² On the sixth day, “God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*.”³ “The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were *pleasing to the eye* and *good* for food.”⁴

God makes the world a good place and then commands human beings to make it *even better*. Before the fall, before any hint of sin and brokenness enters the world, God gives mankind an overarching reason for being here—a mission to carry out, a task to do.

In Genesis 1:27 God makes male and female in his image and commands them to be fruitful, increase in numbers, fill the earth, and rule over it. In Genesis 2:15 we see that “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” Adam and Eve were to work the garden and make it even more fruitful.

2 Genesis 1:10 (NIV).

3 Genesis 1:31.

4 Genesis 2:9.

God intended for Adam and Eve to improve the good things he had given them. They were to use their ingenuity and effort to develop every aspect of life and improve its function. Some theologians call this first commandment the creation mandate or the cultural mandate, while others call it the cultural commission in order to connect it with the Great Commission. We are called to create culture—language, food, government, schools, systems—everything that constitutes the societies and communities in which we live.

In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve disobey God, allowing sin to enter the world. While sin is a destructive force that affects everything, it does not change God's intention for flourishing and goodness in this world. God does not decide, even at this point, that flourishing and goodness only apply to the spiritual realm.

No, he remains committed to his creation and the people he placed here. God did not create the world and life to be *very good* in Genesis 1 and 2 only to change his mind when sin entered the picture in Genesis 3. God did not change his purpose for mankind. He did not stop caring deeply about all dimensions of human life, both here on earth and eternally.

God's response throughout the Old Testament and into the New is to call his people back to a place of flourishing and goodness in this life as he designed it. In Jeremiah 31 God's promise to Israel for restoration and healing is earthly and tangible—it is not purely spiritual. He promises his people they will be planting vineyards and enjoying the fruit. They will be rejoicing in the bounty of grain, new wine and olive oil, flocks and herds.

We see this intention fully expressed in Jesus as he heals the sick and the lame, feeds the 5,000, helps fishermen with their catch, gives sight to blind, restores the outcast, and even turns water into good wine at a wedding.

Colossians 1 tells us that Christ died to reconcile all things in heaven and on earth. “All things” includes not just human souls but the physical world as well. God intends to renew the whole of creation. N. T. Wright says⁵ that this is why the literal resurrection of Jesus to a new physical body is such a big deal. God cares about the physical earth and physical bodies and the things of everyday life. He made us in his image to care the same.

This understanding of Genesis 1 and 2 is important, because it gives our lives direction and purpose. The fall of mankind and its effects are very real. The world is broken; life is indeed difficult. But the larger reality is that God made us and all of creation to flourish, and he gave us the privilege and responsibility to work toward this...even after the fall.

Standing in contrast to this grand purpose are the competing worldviews of materialism and those worldviews that lead to fatalism.

Materialism says that we can change things, but “things” are all we have. It holds that:

- This world is all there is.
- There is no Creator God or relationship with him.
- There are no more days other than those we have in this life.
- There is no purpose beyond the meaning we attach to or derive from our things or life itself.

Fatalism says we can ultimately do nothing to change our lives and the world for good. Those in the grip of animistic religions

5 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

hold that the gods of this world control and shape the events of life. Others believe that actions and events are determined by an impersonal fate or providential destiny.

A man in Rwanda with a severe eye problem visited an ophthalmologist. The doctor treated his eye, which began healing nicely. But midway through the treatment, before the eye could fully heal, the man returned to his village. Why? He said he needed a witch doctor to address the curse that had caused the ailment.

Chris Ampadu of Ghana, who teaches churches in West Africa, says that this kind of fatalism limits development in Africa. He says it comes from an animistic worldview that causes people to believe they have no real control over their lives.⁶

In some respects, dispensational eschatology arising from an incomplete view of the Christian faith encouraged fatalistic thinking in Western churches.

In dispensational theology the “new heaven and new earth” are an entirely separate place beyond this world, which is ultimately doomed. From this perspective I understood that God cares only about the soul of mankind...and that the primary reason Jesus restored things and healed people was to show God’s love and to prove that he was God so that they would believe in him. Similarly, we are to show God’s love so that others will respond to the message of salvation and go to heaven when they die.

However, Isaiah 66:22 reflects the expectation of the Jewish hope that God would one day come and renew the heavens and the earth. Revelation 21 tells us that the new heaven comes when Christ returns to dwell with us, and heaven and earth become one. The new earth is *this* earth, renewed. Yes, the world will be

6 Chris Ampadu, interview (2014), <https://vimeo.com/96033883>.

“shaken” and “burned” and thereby cleansed of sin and unrighteousness, but it will not be completely destroyed.

While the fall of mankind and its effects in Genesis 3 are devastatingly real, it seems clear from the rest of Scripture that God’s intention at creation in Genesis 1 and 2 is unchanged and relates to the here and now. He desires good/flourishing for mankind and creation and has appointed to us the responsibility and privilege to carry this out.

All of this may sound abstract and academic, but truly grasping this biblical perspective has major implications for how we live. Some Christians in war-torn South Sudan put it like this:

Adili: “We still have hope, no matter how the situation looks.”

Joseph: “We are charged to take care of the whole of creation.”

Jok: “I had the thought that South Sudan was cursed, but now I know different. God has [blessed] and will bless South Sudan.”

God desires flourishing for all people and all of creation just as he did at creation, despite the brokenness of fallen humanity. Knowing we are made to flourish gives us purpose, vision, and motivation for our daily lives.