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II: Technology and the Biblical Narrative: Fall and Redemption

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Introduction

In the previous article, we assessed some fundamental conceptions of the Doctrine of Creation and the mandates given to humanity. We saw that Creation is to be considered a gift and that it remains fully dependent on God and his sustaining work. We also saw that God calls the world he has created 'good' and the human beings that were to inhabit it, 'very good'. However, that is not how the world was to continue to exist, for evil and sin entered the Garden, through the temptation of a snake and the exercising of the human will. This current brief article will aim to do two things: I) paint a picture of the current state of Creation by reflecting on the Fall and the hope that lies in the expectation that Christ will come again; and II) show how work and human activity in the current age are affected by sin.

Fall

Significant theological treatises have been written about the nature of the Fall, the nature of sin and evil, and the ways in which the fall of humanity has affected creaturely existence. There is no space, time, and frankly need to rehash all those conversations here. Neither will it be of paramount importance for our conversation to take a stance on all the minutia related to the doctrine of sin and the Fall. That being said, I do not want to suggest that it is unimportant to answer these questions. Rather, a couple theological truths need to be discussed and addressed to have a meaningful conversation about the status of technology and the ways in which we might relate to it.

The first important theological truth that must be underscored is that there was no necessity leading to the fall. In other words, God did not create the world in such a way that there was no other way but for humanity to sin. Adam and Eve could have refrained from sinning. God created humanity with a properly functioning human will that had the capacity to disobey God's command, but there was no compulsion on the human will 'baked in' with God's act of creation. Why is this important? Well, it does two important things: it shows that sin truly is an aberration, a detraction, a blemish on a world which was truly created good by God. If somehow sin was an inherent part of creation, human beings could be considered victims and not the ones responsible for sin. This is also the second point; the Fall finds its cause in the human will and not God's creative act. Humanity exercised the power of its will contra to God's intentions, even though they were free to do so. It would lead us to far off track, but the belief that God knows all things, even before they happen should not be placed in tension with the belief that there was no compulsion on humanity. The fact that God foreknew that Adam and Eve would sin, even before he created them, does not necessarily imply that this constitutes a necessity on the Fall.¹

The second theological position that must be mentioned is that the Fall, though the result of human activity, touched the whole of the world, maybe even the cosmos. All creation is subject to frustration and bondage following the Fall (cf. Rom. 8). The current state of post-Fall humanity is not one of a fallen humanity in world that is not affected by sin, but rather: fallen humanity exists in a fallen world.

Thirdly, sin has affected all relationships human beings can have. The relationship with God, above all, has been altered because of sin. Where Adam and Eve were able to walk in the Garden with God, they are now sent out into the world where God has not completely abandoned them, but the manner in which human beings are able to relate to God has significantly altered and is, in a meaningful sense, 'less'. Human beings' interpersonal relations have also been affected, which becomes quite clear in the curse of Genesis 3 and the introduction of shame. Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness and the curse introduces envy and strife (the effect of which we see clearly worked out in the story of Cain and Abel). Finally, the curse also touches the relationship of humanity with the soil they work on and with. Creation itself becomes a source of toil and trouble.

Lastly, sin has affected the way in which our faculties function. Our mind, will, ratio, memory, creativity, and desires have all been touched by the effects of sin. No longer are our faculties inclined to honour God and to behave in a way that affirms the goodness of our humanity, but our baseline attitude is one of continuing and furthering the Fall: we tend to live selfishly, encourage our own bondage to sin, ignore the fact that in God we find rest,

¹ For those interested in looking at this constellation of questions, you could look at the work of Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and the Reformed Scholastics (Turritin, Voetius, Gomarus, and the like).

and we abuse the world we were called to cultivate. Sin has touched everything, and the works of our hands require the goodness of God to be truly good.

The Pervasiveness of Sin

This article is not meant to be a litany of negativity, but when we talk about technology and human advancements, these truths must be mentioned for us not to fall into a type of functional-Pelagianism—the idea that some of the inherent goodness of humanity and the proper functioning of human faculties remained after the fall, which simply require training, and not the continuous grace of God, to make God honouring decisions.

Scripture itself shows how the goods of work and responsibility to cultivate, which God gave to humanity, were being perverted by sin. As we mentioned before, when evil enters the Biblical narrative in the third chapter of Genesis, an immediate result is that fruitful and joyful work is transformed into painful toil.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Human work, and by extension, all forms of technology which flow from our hands and engage with the created world around us are now threatened by futility and pointlessness, because of the brokenness of our natures and the inexorable cycle of life and death.

The brokenness of humanity's desires becomes evident in the chapters following the sequence in Eden, through Cain and Abel, the patriarchs, and the Noah story. Those disordered desires, combined with an ability to produce and develop technologies led the people in Genesis 11 to attempt to make a name for themselves, to stave off the threat of futility, scattering, and extermination. It shows the people trying to undo the curse by reaching for the mighty heights of God himself (in effect, retracing the steps of Adam and Eve all over again). The story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is rich in symbolism and significance for our current technological age.

Now the whole world had one language and a common form of speech. And as people journeyed eastward, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." So, they used brick instead of stone, and tar instead of mortar. "Come," they said, "let us build for ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of all the earth."

Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the sons of men were building. And the LORD said, "If they have begun to do this as one people speaking the same language, then nothing they devise will be beyond them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So, the LORD scattered them from there over the face of all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it is called Babel, for there the LORD confused the language of the whole world, and from that place the LORD scattered them over the face of all the earth.

The language of the city builders "...let us make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4) is a direct repetition of the Hebrew language that the Creator God uses in Genesis 1: 26 "... let us make humankind..." The implication is that instead of obeying the divine mandate to fill the earth, the humans choose to disobey and to use technology for their own self-aggrandisement. The awesome potential that comes when human beings collaborate on technological innovation is hinted at, "*Behold they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible...*" God's intervention to prevent the humans achieving their goals is both a judgement on their disobedience as well as an act of grace to limit the evil that humans are capable of.

Babel represents the evil potential that cities represent. A focus for human arrogance, self-aggrandisement, concentration of power, riches and technology, together with the inevitable accompaniment of the abuse of the weak and vulnerable. Cities are the places where the powerful and the rich feel their strength and where they can shake their fists at the divine plans and purposes for Creation. In the biblical narrative, three physical cities represent the acme of fallen human power, Babel, Babylon, and in the New Testament, Rome.

We will return to the biblical theme of the city later. But for now, we will look briefly at another perversion of human technology – the creation of idols. In the world of the Old Testament, idolatry was to take a product of human craftsmanship and to invest it with spiritual significance and power. But the strange reality is that once the idol is constructed it may then start to exert a negative and dehumanising impact on its worshippers. We see this tendency described in Psalm 135.

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them. Psalm 135: 15-18

All forms of technology have the potential to become idols, exerting a malign hold over those who learn to place their trust in the idol's power. Even though the work of humanity to

uphold and shape the world around, with the ultimate hope for it to flourish, is a God-given blessing, exercising that capacity to 'create' after the Fall comes with a serious challenge. If this technology, this expression of creativity, is not redeemed and aimed at honouring God, and through that, the flourishing of his creation, it will go awry and be destructive instead. Technology is not an evil per se but can, as we see through the examples of the Tower of Babel and the discourse on idols in the Psalms, become a destructive force. Sin's pervasiveness, through the brokenness of our nature, faculties, and context, has also touched the development of technology: it can be an expression of our fallenness and even further it.

Redemption & the New Jerusalem

However, clearly, technology is not inherently bad or sinful. There is hope and redemption possible for these human inventions. As was already hinted at above, through the salvific work of Christ, there is hope for restoration, redemption, and regeneration. Besides the fact that there may be redemption and regeneration possible for our faculties, we also see that there is hope for human inventions in the age to come. The first glimpse we have of the final part of the narrative is at the resurrection on Easter Sunday. When Christ is raised as a physical, touchable, recognizable human being, God proclaims his final confidence in the original creation order. God is going to make a new world - but it is going to be built out of the old. It is all part of the drama - it is what was intended all along. The new creation is going to be the ultimate fulfilment and consummation of the old, and redeemed humanity is central in the story. In fact, the redemption of the entire cosmos cannot take place until humanity is redeemed and restored. That is why Paul says, *"The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.* (Romans 8:19-21).

We saw earlier that the cities of Babel, Babylon, and Rome provide symbols of human pride and power. In the final book of the Bible, the great city of Rome and its worldwide Empire is described not only as Babylon but also as 'the beast', whose power is rooted in spiritual evil, and which wages continual war against Christ and his followers. But ultimately Babylon/Rome is subject to catastrophic judgement and destruction. And following this dramatic annihilation, the new Jerusalem is revealed. God makes this wonderful statement, "Behold I am making all things new." But the newness of the new heaven and the new earth is that of restoration and renewal, rather than a completely new start. Many of the biblical references point back to Eden, emphasising the continuity of the biblical narrative. Right from the beginning of the story, God's plan was always to create a more wonderful and glorious Eden which he could indwell in the presence of his chosen people.

The Holy City comes down from heaven and rests on the earth, as the centre of the new creation. The city does not contain a temple but instead it is indwelt and illuminated by the glory of God. Strikingly, it is a garden city. There is a final harmonious integration between the natural world, symbolised by a river and the tree of life (pointing back to the original Eden), and the very best of human craftsmanship. The nations of the earth will walk by the light radiating from the new Jerusalem. The gates of the city are perpetually open, and the glory and honour of the pagan nations will be brought into the city. But nothing unclean or evil can enter the Holy City.

The new redeemed cosmos is going to become in one sense the new Temple. The Lamb is at the centre, and just as the glory of God filled Solomon's temple, so the glory of God is going to fill the entire redeemed cosmos. *For the earth will be filled with the knowledge and the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.* (Habbakuk 2:14). In the new creation, the quality of the work we do here and now is going to be tested. *Each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.* (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

If our human work has been of lasting eternal quality, (gold, silver or costly gems), then the Apostle Paul promises that it will survive into the new age. The lasting work of our hands is not lost, destroyed and annihilated. As we have seen in a previous article, it is not possible to penetrate the mysteries of this wonderful glimpse of the future. But it is the final chapter of the story which provides the meaning of the entire biblical narrative. This was God's purpose in the work of creation. To unite the entire cosmos in the person of his Son, the Lamb, and to redeem a holy and spotless Bride for the Bridegroom. And we are called to live each day now in the light of what is to come.

Conclusion

As an expression of good human capacities, technology has been infected with the same problems and challenges as has the rest of creation and humanity: without redemption, if it is not geared to furthering genuine human flourishing, it tends to destruction. However, that is not to say that there is no hope for technological advancements. In Scripture we see warnings against the misapplication of technology and the possible tendency for technology to become a source of repression. Nevertheless, around the resurrection of Christ and the images of the New Jerusalem, we see that God also honours human invention, redeems it, and utilises it in his own plans. The next article will further reflect on this relationship between human activity in the here and now, and the age to come.

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