

REDEMPTION

Returning to God's Grand Design



John D. Beckett



Suppose you are dropped, blindfolded, into an unknown foreign land. Once your blindfold is removed, your greatest impulse is to know where you are—to get oriented and make sense of your new situation.

A person's spiritual journey is similar. You may find isolated indicators of your new habitat, but you yearn for context. Where am I? Where do I turn next?

The biblical theme of redemption can be your key to seeing the larger picture.

Achieving context may be uncomfortable. It involves searching and being stretched. But as the pieces come together, you'll discover your new land is one of excitement, adventure and great reward.



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INTRODUCTION

The theme of redemption forms the storyline of some of the greatest literature ever written, drama ever produced, and music ever composed. A broken friendship is mended. A downcast neighbor is restored. A captured soldier is freed.

Why do these stories forcefully grab at our heartstrings? Maybe in them we find threads of redemption woven into our own lives. A friend forgives us. A judge grants mercy. A good Samaritan pays our hospital bill.

The redemption narrative might be personal, for example, a prodigal son returning home. It could be broader—a family reuniting or a community pulling together after a fierce storm. But now, for a moment, imagine the unfathomable—the redemption of all of God’s creation.

Growing up, we had a few Bibles neatly tucked away on bookshelves in our family home. They were rarely opened. They were thick, their covers black, imposing. They smelled musty. I was in my twenties when I found our family’s mysterious black book was accessible in ways I could hardly have imagined. I began reading it, a little each day.

I soon realized the Bible is unlike any book ever written. Its authorship spans millennia. It is history, poetry, prophecy—expansive yet intimate. Sometimes a single phrase unlocks a mystery. A verse guides a pending decision.

Redemption is a dominant theme in the Bible. The lost, found. The disenfranchised, restored. I find that this is a recurring emphasis, not only in our daily lives and relationships, but also on a grand scale with implications for all creation.

Join with me on this brief journey. We begin in a garden. You can almost hear the loving whispers of God with his new companions, Adam and Eve.



CREATION: GOD CREATES MANKIND FOR FELLOWSHIP WITH HIMSELF

Why did God create mankind? Out of need? Unlikely. Heaven was already populated with a multitude of angels and other creatures. The early chapters of Genesis give us the strongest clue. They tell us that God created mankind to have warm, intimate and open fellowship with himself.

Unlike other objects of God's creation—fish, birds, mammals, reptiles—mankind was fashioned in God's own image. We could reason and communicate with words. We could invent and make decisions. We could love others and respond to others' love toward us.

Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth. (Genesis 1:26)

The first people were given names, Adam and Eve. They were set in a vibrant, fruitful garden.

The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he placed the man he had formed. The Lord God caused to grow out of the ground every tree pleasing in appearance and good for food, including the tree of life in the middle of the garden, as well as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 2:8-9)

God's bond with the first couple was idyllic.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze...so the Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:8-9)

We might wish for more detail, but this glimpse reveals God's intent—a bond of peace, companionship, delight. But trouble was lurking. God had also endowed his masterpiece with the freedom to choose. Adam and Eve chose unwisely, resulting in a tragic fracture in their relationship with God.

With consequences for each of us, the first couple's rebellion launched mankind on a tumultuous journey, one that would play out over the ensuing thousands of years.



THE FALL: FELLOWSHIP IS FRACTURED

The early chapters of Genesis rank among the most important words ever recorded. There, we learn that God destined his new creation to “walk with him in the garden” in perfect harmony. Adam and Eve were richly endowed, made in God’s own image, gifted with the unique capacity of being able to choose—a gift that was about to be woefully abused.

While the garden was pristine, it was not a place where “anything goes.” God, in his love, set limits. He warned: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (Genesis 2:17) As children today flaunt parental boundaries designed for their benefit, the first couple flagrantly disobeyed. Their transgression became known as “sin.”

Today, many ignore the concept of sin and its consequences. As a result, we are blinded to that which most requires a cure. For example, we may not like the doctor’s diagnosis of our disease, but that doesn’t remove the disease. It only impedes the remedy.

God’s action in response to Adam and Eve’s disobedience was swift and dramatic. They were evicted from the garden. Gates were closed. Angelic beings were stationed to prevent reentry. The first humans could now only peer longingly at the bountiful land and once joyful bond they had forsaken.

A particular evil force had incited their disobedience. Characterized in this account as a cunning serpent, his name was Satan, or the devil. Just as we are in peril if we ignore the reality of sin, we are at risk if we ignore the reality of the devil, the unrelenting enemy of our souls.

God had no intention of allowing the tragic separation to remain. He pronounced to the devil:

I will put hostility between you and the woman (Eve), and between your offspring and her offspring (the Seed). He will strike your head, and you will strike (bruise) his heel. (Genesis 3:15)

From this prophecy we learn that a future offspring of Eve would one day strike the head of the devil. In the process, his heel would be bruised. That offspring is Jesus. The prophet Isaiah describes the culmination of the conflict:

He (Jesus) was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him. (Isaiah 53:5)

So, from the outset of mankind's rebellion, Scripture offers the eventual hope of redemption. The entirety of the Old Testament points in one direction: God's plan to reestablish the relationship between himself and his creation, the very relationship he fashioned from the beginning.

How would he do this? How long would it take?



THE LAW: WISDOM FOR DAILY LIVING

Genesis affirms that God created mankind for himself. He desired a warm, personal, trusting relationship. Sin entered with its devastating consequences, but God's love for his creation never wavered.

Cast out of the garden, mankind was thrust into a turbulent and perplexing journey. Throughout, God's plan for restoration relentlessly unfolded. First, he called one man, Abraham, declaring that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Through a permanent covenant God promised Abraham he would become the father of many nations and he and his descendants would be given choice land on which to live. (Genesis 15, 17) In ways that go beyond our limited human understanding this people group, the Jews, were destined to become the cradle of a restored creation.

To Moses, God dramatically imparted a compact set of Ten Commandments—etched in two stone tablets by the finger of God himself. Each of these ten was for the good of his people. Where Adam and Eve had transgressed by violating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their descendants were provided a lifegiving love letter— “Do *this* and you will live...”

We are familiar with many applications of God's law today. "Freedom of worship," for example, secures our right to openly love and worship God. Most societies accept that it is fundamentally good to bless and care for others. We know honoring parents is of great worth. Likewise, the law reminds us it is wrong to murder, to steal and to slander others.

Yet even the law, for all its value, was never intended to be a permanent solution. The Apostle Paul speaks of it as a "schoolmaster"—an essential bridge that governed life during the Old Testament period. It provided structure and priority, guiding how God's people should relate to him and to each other. It protected and sustained God's people as they traversed the ages, moving steadily toward the fulfillment of God's design—Jesus.

Why this extended chapter in history lasted as long as it did, we don't know, but God knows. What's clear is that a profound pageant was playing out. God was pressing toward the restoration of a covenantal relationship with each of us, his prized creation. Nothing in heaven nor on earth would hold him back.

Yet, as important as the law was, God did not limit his engagement with his people to this means of guidance alone. He also sent prophets, ones who would proclaim his intentions for days yet to unfold.



THE PROPHETS: VOICES OF HOPE TO A WEARY WORLD

The Old Testament is sometimes referred to as The Law and the Prophets. The Law provided a framework by which God's people should live. Prophets were those who heard from God and relayed what they heard to others. They revealed God's heart, his nature and his intentions with words that ranged from predictions to warnings to encouragement.

The prophet Jeremiah, for example, gave hope to the Jewish people in Babylonian captivity: "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)

Some prophets were also noted leaders, such as King David, a warrior with a heart for God. Another was Daniel, a gifted advisor to several kings. Others were more obscure, yet influential, like Isaiah and Ezekiel. Their words were often unpopular. Some paid with their lives for speaking hard truths. Perhaps deep conviction has caused you to courageously speak out on an issue. It was lonely, costly, but you paid the price because you knew it was the right thing to do.

God's primary purpose in sending prophets was to prepare the way for the Messiah, the one who would remedy mankind's fallen condition. Some prophecies reveal amazing detail about the coming Savior, such as where and when he would be born, what he would encounter and how he would die.

The prophets formed a bridge from the garden to Jesus. They told a wandering and distressed people: God cares, he loves you, he wants the best for you. Endure. The Promise is coming.

As the day drew near, God sent a prophet called John the Baptist. He baptized people with water, calling them to repentance. One day he saw Jesus approach. "Look," he said, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29, 34)

By providing the law and sending prophets, God forged the way for people to prepare for the watershed event in all history. He knew how capable each of us is of being distracted, at risk of missing the most important thing. Consider, for example, a bride approaching her wedding day. She could become so consumed with choosing flower arrangements and photographers that she misses the joy and significance of the marriage itself.

Through the prophets God was imploring us, warning us: "Get ready." "Watch." "The Savior is coming!" All who were alert would soon experience a seismic shift in God's dealings with his creation. He would come among them in the person of his very own Son.



JESUS: A PROMISE FULFILLED

The birth of Jesus, foreshadowed by the Law and the Prophets, was about to become history's turning point. Could this birth—an innocent, helpless baby in a manger—be the climax of mankind's wandering and turmoil?

Some Old Testament writings can leave us mystified. Why did God inflict a catastrophic flood on the earth? Why were the Jewish people, his “chosen,” enslaved in Egypt and later taken into captivity in Babylon?

God had one overriding purpose in this extended period of darkness. A particular key unlocked these seeming mysteries for me: *God was at work, carefully safeguarding the Seed*. You may recall this term, the Seed, appearing early in the Genesis account. That Seed was Jesus. God was fulfilling his promise. Nothing, neither bloodshed nor war nor wandering nor disobedience nor betrayal would prevent the Seed from achieving God's intended purpose.

His timing was perfect. “When the time came to completion, God sent his Son.” (Galatians 4:4) Circumstances lend credence to why this was a unique period in history. The world was at relative peace. Rome had developed an extensive road system. Greek, an international language, enabled people to communicate cross-culturally.

Jesus was conceived in the womb of a young virgin named Mary. Though engaged to a man named Joseph, the two had remained chaste. Luke, a physician and rigorous historian, describes the angelic announcement of this miraculous event.

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

Jesus' parentage was that of both God and a woman. He was fully God, but also fully man. His earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, nurtured and educated their young son. He learned carpentry from Joseph and the two worked together. Can you imagine the exquisite workmanship of the tables, chairs and other furniture they crafted?

Jesus' ultimate calling began at age 30, the point at which men were eligible to become rabbis (teachers). God's affirmation rang out at Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased." (Matthew 3:17)

Joined by twelve companions, Jesus pressed forward into an intense three-year period of ministry. The impact would change history. We can be grateful that diligent followers recorded these events. The resulting gospels and letters are the timeless treasure entrusted to us—the New Testament.



KINGDOM OF GOD: THE GARDEN BROUGHT FORWARD?

Jesus' itinerate ministry was packed into three brief years. He grieved the error, false teaching and hypocrisy he confronted at every turn. His mission was to drop truth like a plumbline into the confusion. Through word and example, he would reveal his heavenly Father's true nature. He would shed the light of God's glory into earth's darkest crevasses.

Jesus was God's special envoy of another kingdom. From the outset of his ministry, he proclaimed the arrival of "the kingdom of God." "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:15) What amazing news! Though we are functioning in an earthbound place with its daily dramas, take heart, another kingdom is in our midst!

Jesus described the sequence and impact this way: "The Law and the Prophets were until John (the Baptist); since then, the good news of the kingdom of God has been proclaimed, and everyone is urgently invited to enter it." (Luke 16:16) Jesus directed his followers to make the kingdom the object of their deep desire and fervent prayer: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

Yet, the kingdom of God can seem mysterious. E. Stanley Jones, who wrote several classic books in the mid-twentieth century, understood its significance. He refers to the kingdom of God as a unifying worldview, "God's all-out answer to

man's total needs" and our "native land." He says, "All science, all knowledge, all achievements, all nations, all persons, all things must be related to this Unshakable Kingdom in surrender and obedience and alignment or else end in frustration and failure and decay." (The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person, p. 53, 33)

With Jesus' focus on the kingdom, we might wonder if he had one eye on the kingdom he was proclaiming, and the other on the garden he knew from the time of Creation. Was he connecting dots in a way that further clarifies God's grand design?

As noted earlier, Jesus said, "Everyone is urgently invited to enter it." What a compelling invitation: to grasp God's true nature; to draw upon his forgiveness and grace; to honor him; to love him; to allow him to give us identity and shape our individual destinies. To intimately bond with the God who created us for close fellowship with himself, the God who would do anything, even at the sacrifice of his own Son, to reestablish the bond he desired from the beginning.



REDEMPTION: **JESUS RESTORES THE PATHWAY** **BACK TO THE FATHER**

How can a single event be one of both shame and triumph? To the watching world, the long-awaited Messiah suffered a bewildering, unjust death at the hands of a pagan occupying force. Even Jesus' closest followers abandoned hope. Crucifixion and the grave seemed final.

Days earlier, as he neared Jerusalem, Jesus walked full stride ahead of his fearful disciples. (Mark 10:32) He alone knew what lay ahead, not only his physical death, but that he would soon bear the crushing weight of mankind's sin. So, he made this final appeal to his heavenly Father: "All things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will." (Mark 14:36)

Jesus died his agonizing death more quickly than the criminals either side of him. Sundown and the beginning of the Sabbath were imminent. Embalming and burial in a borrowed grave must happen immediately. Once completed, the body was laid to rest, the grave sealed and a Roman guard posted. Early on the third day, a small group of tearful women approached the gravesite to anoint Jesus' body. To them came the astonishing news that Jesus was not there, that his body had not been stolen, but that he had risen!

Early followers would soon recall words spoken by John the Baptist. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Only then would they grasp that Jesus' death fulfilled the long-standing pattern, commanded by God, of offering unblemished lambs as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Now, Jesus had become that unblemished lamb.

Jesus had risen and was alive! Not just spiritually, but physically. The first Easter! In the next days he appeared to his disciples and others: "He also presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." (Acts 1:3)

N.T. Wright, in The Challenge of Jesus, observes: "Jesus' resurrection lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It is woven into the very structure of Christian life and thought...informing the future hope both for humans and for the cosmos." (p. 126)

For the Apostle Paul, the death, burial and resurrection were integral to God's grand design: "In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:14) This is the foundation for our salvation, the fulfillment of God's plan set in motion at the time of mankind's tragic fall. God and man reconciled. The pathway back to the Father restored.



THE WAY OF SALVATION: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

Jesus said, “For the Son of Man has come to seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10) The Apostle Paul echoes this theme: “God, our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3, 4) The Apostle Peter declares, “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Acts 2:21)

What is meant by these terms, “saved,” “to be saved?” This question has been debated for generations. We could ask: If a person were going to be saved, then saved from what? Scriptures use disturbing terms to describe the condition of the unsaved: lost; slaves to sin; in darkness; headed toward death. Does this not sound like the tragic legacy from mankind’s fall?

Jesus inaugurated a radically different life-direction. “I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance.” (John 10:10) The abundant life promises these compelling alternatives: found; freed from slavery; into light; alive; a pathway that shines brighter and brighter. Paul speaks of our being rescued from one domain, darkness, and catapulted into another domain, that of God’s own Son. (Colossians 1:13) Would not anyone, if they could, choose such a destiny?

Here is the dilemma: “If they could choose.” Could God have given us the freedom to make such a momentous decision? If he wanted us saved, might he not have done so by edict? After all, he is God! But rather than mandating, he has extended his grace toward us enabling us to choose. We are to come willingly, as volunteers, not conscripts. See how this is consistent with the way in which he designed us in the first place, enabled with the same freedom he gave Adam and Eve in the garden!

In 1980, the economist Milton Friedman wrote the landmark book, Free to Choose. He says we are endowed with personal, economic and political freedom. But he omits the most vital freedom of all, spiritual freedom. Remarkably, God gave us this ultimate freedom, and entrusted us to use it wisely.

Our opportunity to choose or not choose spiritual freedom is the key to the way of salvation. This inflection point is at the very heart of Jesus’ mission on earth—to his life, his death and resurrection. Our very lives depend on understanding our freedom to choose and making the right choice.



THE WAY OF SALVATION: REPENT AND BELIEVE

You have now captured the strong momentum of the Bible's message, how God has been unrelentingly committed over thousands of years to fulfill his purposes.

- Beginning in a garden, God, Adam and Eve were wonderfully bonded
- The couple disobeyed God, were alienated from him and thrust from his presence
- God initiated the process of redemption—stirring faith and anticipation through the Law and the Prophets
- At just the right time, Jesus, God's Son, was born of a young virgin and grew to manhood
- Jesus embarked on a brief period of intense ministry showing his Father's true nature
- He was crucified, bearing in himself the sins of mankind
- Through his death, he made possible reconciliation between each person and God
- Reconciliation is offered but requires individual acceptance

This is the “what” of God's plan of salvation. Now we look at the implications, the “so what?”

The way of salvation is to appropriate what God has done on our behalf and apply it personally. The Apostle John states, “But to all who did receive him, he gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in his name.” (John 1:12)

The key elements of this personal decision include:

- Acknowledge your sinful condition
- Repent, which is to ask forgiveness for sin in your life
- Believe that Jesus, God's Son, came to earth, died and was resurrected, reestablishing the relationship between God and his creation, thus becoming your Savior
- Receive Jesus personally by surrendering your life to him
- Follow Jesus as his disciple

Taking these vital steps toward God can be expressed in a prayer—not mental assent, but from the heart. The words can be your own, but might follow this guideline:

Dear God, I acknowledge that I am a sinner. I need your forgiveness. I believe you sent your Son, Jesus, to sacrifice his life for me and redeem me from my sinful nature. I now turn from my sins and accept your forgiveness. I receive your Son, Jesus Christ, into my life as my Lord and my Savior. I will trust you and follow you with all my heart. Amen.

The promise is yours. If you have received him, he is in you, and you are in him. The relationship that was tragically fractured has now been wonderfully restored.



THE WAY OF SALVATION: NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

In a letter to one of the New Testament churches, the Apostle Paul gives this description of personal transformation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Such radical change brings both great risk and great reward. New life is fragile, whether a plant, an animal or a person. Each must be nurtured to maturity. The greatest risk to a person who is newly born spiritually is to simply forge ahead without intentionally adjusting to what God has done in his or her life.

Great reward awaits our pursuit and patience. If you have made this decision, safeguard your new life by taking time to pause and reflect. Consider how you are being equipped by our loving God, who, in the words of the Apostle Peter, “has given us everything required for life and godliness.” (2 Peter 1:3) We have been redeemed at a price we cannot fathom, the precious blood of Jesus Christ. As “new creations,” we are no longer aliens. Fellowship that was fractured has been restored. We have come into our inheritance.

To help us on our journey, God gave us his Word, the Old and New Testaments, truth distilled to the finest detail. He sent us his Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to infill us, to be our companion and our guide. He will lead us into reliable friendships where we can receive teaching and good fellowship. Steadily, we discover God's overwhelming love for us and his desire that we walk together with him in close fellowship.

The goal, now, is to grow and to grow and to grow in Christ. Lifelong! It is to take full advantage of our newly restored relationship. Yes, there may be habits and associations that we want to shed, but with proper focus these will naturally adjust. We will be so consumed with our love for God, his Word and his people, that those things that have pulled us down will lose their allure.

So breathe deeply. Experience the joy of being a new creation. Wonder with amazement at God's provision. Enjoy your new life as it emerges. You've begun the greatest adventure one can possibly imagine. You've been born anew. Life, real life awaits.



CONCLUSION

The Bible is a wondrous revelation of God's nature and grand design. Its message begins in a garden and traverses a life-giving path, informing and blessing all who venture on it. Those who heed its abiding truths emerge as sturdy pilgrims who have been redeemed. God's kingdom is their new dwelling place—their “native land.” The universal theme of redemption has become personal. They know their Lord and he knows them.

The more we understand God, the more we will honor him, love him and want to walk with him. Here is a description of the God we serve by Charles Spurgeon, a great preacher from the nineteenth century:

We must meditate on God's attributes, and consider his majesty, for he is not only infinitely powerful, wise, all sufficient, and glorious, but he is also supremely good. His character is matchless. He is a pure and holy God whom we worship. It would and should be the greatest pleasure to serve him. The angels will tell you this. It is total bliss to do his will.

Challenge and forcefully reject every impression of God that isn't worthy of his matchless name and impeccable character. Shower him with your deepest love and gratitude. Refocus on the things that really matter. Fall in love with Jesus and dwell in his love for you. Nurture that priceless relationship which is beyond human comprehension!

Return to the garden! It is your true inheritance, now and into eternity.



NOTES

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OTHER RESOURCES



John D. Beckett is chairman of the Beckett Companies in Elyria, Ohio, and the author of *Loving Monday: Succeeding in Business Without Selling Your Soul* and *Mastering Monday: A Guide to Integrating Faith and Work*, published by InterVarsity Press. You are welcome to visit www.beckettpress.com or send comments to johnbeckett@beckettcorp.com.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John D. Beckett was born and grew up in Elyria, Ohio. He graduated from M.I.T. in 1960, after which he worked as an engineer in the aerospace industry. In 1963 he joined his father's small manufacturing business, and became president in 1965 upon the death of his father. The company has grown to become a worldwide leader in producing engineered components for residential and commercial heating and related industries. The company, with its affiliates, employs some 1200 people.

Mr. Beckett serves as a board member of The King's College in New York City, Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ, International), CEO Forum, Global Media Outreach and Intercessors for America.

His first book, *Loving Monday: Succeeding in Business Without Selling Your Soul*, was published in 1998 and is now available in twenty languages. His second book, *Mastering Monday: A Practical Guide to Integrating Faith and Work*, was released in 2006.

Mr. Beckett received honorary Doctor of Laws degrees from Spring Arbor University in 2002 and The King's College in 2008. He has also been named "Christian Businessman of the Year" by the Christian Broadcasting Network (1999) and manufacturing "Entrepreneur of the Year" by Ernst & Young (2003).

He resides in Elyria, Ohio with his wife, Wendy, to whom he has been married since 1961. They have six children and eighteen grandchildren.

