

Summary of the Biblical Story of Maturity

The Story of God's Desire for Your Life

(Unless otherwise stated, all bible quotes are from the ESV.)

Introduction

This is a summary of the whole biblical story of spiritual maturity that God intends for people. It is grounded in Scripture and is confirmed by the lives and writings of the great godly teachers of the Christian church since its birth.

In summary, the purpose of our lives is to *restore the image of God damaged in the Garden of Eden, which is accomplished through Christ, so we can glorify and enjoy God, and be fruitful and united in love with him and with his followers as he makes us into a New Eden community which he will perfect on the New Earth*. This summarizes God's mission in us. Restoring God's image is the equivalent of becoming Christlike. By "fruitful" I mean exhibiting the virtues (fruits) of the Spirit, doing good works for others and being productive in society. This includes our family, our congregation, our community, and our occupation. On the New Earth, God will magnify our fruitfulness. A shorter version of this is: *our destiny is the perfect community of love with God and his followers*. We will explain this mission and destiny from Scripture throughout this article.

Beginnings

God originally created humans in his image of goodness in order to be in perfect communion with himself and with each other. He intended for his beautiful virtues to permeate all human experience. God placed them in a beautiful garden, made them good, graced them with his presence, and gave them the privilege and calling of multiplying and bringing their goodness, leadership and creativity to the whole earth. He gave them many desires, such as purpose, friendship, fruitfulness and wisdom, which he was fulfilling for them. They lived in harmony, peace, love, and joy. God's goodness was everywhere in the Garden.

Recovering the Lost Union of Love Through the Old Covenant

Love is God's bond of unity and since true love requires that the lover freely choose the beloved he allowed humans to choose whether they would love him. They listened to Satan, the deceiver,

and chose not to love God and so they lost full communion with God and each other. They did this by breaking God's law of living by the fruit of the tree of life. They chose instead to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This brought guilt and condemnation on themselves and their descendants.

The condemnation had widespread impact. They lost the direct presence of God. Destructiveness became the hallmark of the human experience, though they could still experience some of God's blessings. Their nature became corrupted but they did not entirely lose the image of God imprinted on them. They fulfilled their God-given desires in destructive ways. Their emotions became chaotic and misleading. They could not follow the law of loving God and each other (Gen. 4:1-16); we refer to this failure as sin. Furthermore, since the planet no longer had humans to nurture and develop it, it was subjected to corruption (Rom. 8:20-21) leaving it groaning for restoration (Rom. 8:22).

God decided to redeem his creation on earth. He promised that humans would destroy the deceiver, (Gen. 3:15). He would lead people into the fulfillment of what he started in the garden, and even go beyond that. Roughly 2000 years before Christ lived, God chose a person in Mesopotamia named Abraham to give birth to a tribe that he would call his own people. He taught these people how to live edifying lives with each other. In his incomparable goodness he also provided a way for them to live in partial communion with him. Through his servant Moses God gave them rules for purifying themselves from ungodliness, including animal sacrifices because it was necessary to pay dearly for the destruction that humans were inflicting on each other and for their rebellion against God who was good. He also provided for a tabernacle (later a temple) in which he would dwell with great power. This temple was a taste of what was lost in the Garden as well as an embassy from heaven of the new Garden to come. Solomon carved garden images of palm trees and flowers on the walls and doors of the temple, (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35).

But this old arrangement, or covenant, with his people did not succeed in producing a nation of people who loved him and followed his ways. God gave them a great king, David, who led the people in godliness, but after him the people turned away from God. They did not destroy the deceiver. They could not produce a new garden on earth where all people lived in harmony and prosperity. This was all rooted in the fact that they could not eliminate the corruption from their nature. The condemnation from the Garden remained.

Jesus as the New Adam and Davidic King

Yet in God's wisdom and design, he was working in all of this to move humanity towards fulfilling their original missions in the Garden of Eden and towards a new creation. He would begin by starting with a new uncorrupted Adam with the restored image of God. God himself, in his being as the Son, was born of a virgin mother in an incarnation and emptied himself of divine

infinities and so a new human race began. This was the beginning of God's work of new creation on earth.

Through Jesus, God inaugurated the prophesied kingdom of God on earth, which had always existed in heaven. But the kingdom on earth began with something that never existed before: a new creation in the form of the new Adam. This new Adam, Jesus of Nazareth, relived a perfect human life as he grew with his Father. Jesus' life answers the question "What does it look like for the image of God to be restored in a human?"

In Jesus we see God's decision to break all the powers that have plagued humans since the Garden. In Jesus' miracles and ministry God declared war on all destructive forces and triumphs over them. He especially broke the power of Satan who held humanity in captivity. Jesus sets humans free. Incredibly, Jesus' followers can fight the same battles and emerge victorious. Jesus promised: "Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do" (Jn. 14:12). Thus, Jesus' life was a pattern of victory that He offers to His followers. He is the Son of God and we can be sons also.

After teaching, ministering, and providing an example by his life of how the new Adams should live in this world, he offered himself up as the final perfect atoning sacrifice for human sin and condemnation. He took the punishment for humans so they could be justified before God's law. Then he completed the new creation of the new Adam by rising from the dead with a new glorified body, triumphing over the deceiver, sin, death and destruction.

After he rose God enthroned Jesus as promised human king on the throne of David (Acts 2:30-36) where Jesus now reigns from heaven over the kingdom of God and all other authorities and powers (Eph. 1:20-23). He is also king over the people of God; he is the head and they are the body. All of this is the beginning of the fulfillment of the many promises in the Old Testament of a coming messiah-king and a coming kingdom. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus is the completion of the beginning of God's new creation and kingdom on earth and is central to all of God's work in history.

This inaugurated kingdom of God includes the spread of supernatural power to all the followers of Jesus. It is power for godliness and power for ministry. Jesus was the perfect model of godliness and he worked miracles and healings beyond anything seen in the Old Testament. Now this power of God can operate through any believer who abides in Christ (Jn. 14:12).

God Replays the Story of the Garden of Eden (The Rebirth of Humans)

Now the story of the Garden is being replayed with a different ending. In the old Garden God allowed humans to reject him since true love requires the freedom to choose. Now God is creating a new Garden in which individual humans are re-created. This time God mysteriously acts to give chosen humans the ability to choose him in Christ. When they choose and believe God forgives their sins, justifies their relationship with him and adopts them as his children. The

Fall is reversed and they become residents of the kingdom of God, which is becoming a New Garden (also known as the New Earth, or the New Jerusalem, or heaven come to Earth), and they receive a new destiny. This is a fulfillment of what God began with Abraham about 2,000 years earlier. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29, NIV). We are heirs of the restoration that began with Abraham.

Residents of the kingdom of God still have to live in a world filled with pain, destruction and death. And residents of the kingdom are not immune to the suffering in the world; on the contrary, we are called by God to embrace suffering as Jesus did, especially suffering for others (John 16:33; Rom. 5:3-5, 8:35-39; James 1:2-4); 1 Peter 4:12-13). This is the way of the Cross that Jesus demonstrated for us to follow (Luke 9:23). The way in which we suffer shines a light to the world that we are followers of Jesus who has endured suffering, but triumphed over it. He gives his followers the power to endure suffering with love and faith in God’s provision and focus on the destiny he promised to his followers. Moreover, suffering produces virtues and maturity which is the restoration of the image of God in us which is the essence of happiness. In this way true love is fulfilled and God begins to fulfill his original purposes for people. He reestablishes the individual union of love that Adam and Eve had in the Garden. This union enables individuals to participate in a community of love with other believers. We are forgiven, secure and loved by God in Christ and this is the foundation of all we do. God begins to fulfill some of the desires he gave us. Our final destiny is a perfected community of love with God and his people, where God will honor us, all our desires will be fulfilled and God will be fully displayed through his people. This is the goal of all of God’s interaction with people throughout history and the supreme theme of the Bible. Summarizing, *God is restoring his image in us so that we can glorify and enjoy him and be fruitful members of his community of love as we move toward its completion in the next age.*

With respect to individual transformation God promises that all who believe in Jesus and follow him will inherit all of the traits of the new Adam (Rom. 8:17). God begins by placing a new self “created after the likeness of God” (Eph. 4:24) inside all believers. Thus, everyone in Christ becomes a new creation (II Cor. 5:17). This is the birth of a new infant “Christ-human” and the restoration of the image of God that was damaged in the Garden. This is the resurrection of a sinner who was dead in sin, but it is not the complete resurrection for the spirit is resurrected (Col. 3:1; Rom. 6:4) but the body will not be resurrected until Jesus returns (Rom. 6:5; 8:11). The believer becomes a sibling of Christ (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:11) who is the New Adam and an adopted child of God in the family of God. And they become citizens of the expanding inaugurated kingdom of God and the New Jerusalem to come.

God goes even further and re-creates the new Garden inside each believer by placing his Spirit inside them. We recall that the Old Testament temple was a reflection of the Garden, but now we are the temple of the Spirit of God. Since we are the new temple of God, we are also the new garden of God. He is present with believers similar to his presence in the old Garden, though partially hidden (I Cor. 13:12). He brings us to maturity by gradually re-creating the conditions

of the Garden inside us through his Spirit. He completes the new Garden by uniting all believers to the Son so that all believers are connected as one body with the Son as the head. This is the partial fulfillment of the community of love with God and his followers that God originally intended for the Garden of Eden.

God Produces Growth in the New Adams

The Son and the Spirit, directed by the Father now generate growth in this new body of Christ and in its Christ-humans. This body is composed of regenerated humans who are now part of the new creation. The body of Christ is the temple of God, (Eph. 2:21-22), and like the old temple God dwells in it in his perfections. Since each member is united with Christ, each member partakes of Christ's divine nature, yet remains a created being. The bible also describes this in the many passages that teach that we are "in Christ" and that Christ is in us.

God transforms each believer into the image of Christ; in other words, he does "Christformation." By God's will we are "predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). He wants believers to "become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13, NIV). He offers to heal their emotions and purge shame and corruption.

Beginning from their rebirth as spiritual infants, God moves believers to develop every dimension of their being, including their newly regenerated minds, emotions, and will. In this way they fulfill God's original plan to generate and complete beings made in his image. They begin to live in harmony, peace, love, and joy.

Jesus works also through his followers, his image-bearers, to defeat the effects of the Fall (death and destruction) and to fulfill their destiny promised in Genesis 3:15 that humans will defeat the deceiver (Eph. 6:12).

He nourishes each member of the body so that they will grow to become complete New Adams. Believers move through phases and continuums of maturity summed up as growth in love and faith. In the New Testament we see six levels of maturity of believers from infants in Christ, to the maturity of deacons, to the maturity of elders, to the maturity of Timothys, to the maturity of Paul and the other apostles, and finally to the human maturity of Jesus.

God produces growth in his people by continually cycling them through five processes: the initiative of God's grace, purification, infilling, Christformation and a union of love.

Thus, Christformation is not an end in itself. The purpose of Christformation is to produce the union of love God desires with his people. As we grow we increasingly participate in God's nature (I Pet. 1:4), which produces the fruits of the Spirit, which is our blessedness. This participation is sometimes experienced as great love or joy, and even euphoria or rapture. Some experience life-changing fillings of the Spirit. This is all because we are actually tasting the infinitely blessed nature of God himself, which is a privilege that is too marvelous to understand.

Thus, another way to describe our cycles of growth is to say that we move from focusing on Christ, to Christformation then to the union of love with God in Christ.

The means of our growth are the appropriation of scripture, fellowship, walking in the Spirit, prayer and active service toward others. Scripture provides the foundation of all we know and do, and we pursue means of growth out of our identity as loved children of God. Hence, these means of growth combine with our three living sources of Christformation - the new birth, the indwelling Spirit and our union with Christ - to produce growing Christformation.

In this way, believers become a community of lights in the world that illuminates the love, joy, truth and power of God in Christ. God draws others to himself through these lights (Matt. 5: 14-16) and the Church declares God's infinite wisdom to heavenly authorities (Eph. 3:10).

Therefore, God places a very high priority on the quality of our light. God's Spirit also wants to move with power through believers for supernatural demonstrations of God's restorative power that draw the lost to Jesus. This radiance of God's glory through the Spirit's power is magnified or dimmed by the purity of our lives, in other words, our maturity.

What does it look like to grow in maturity? In other words, what does a disciple of Jesus look like? A disciple loves God with their whole self. A disciple displays the virtues of Jesus, also known as the fruit of the Spirit (Rom. 12:9-21; Gal. 5:22-32; I Cor. 13; 2 Cor. 6:6-7; Phil. 2:2-8; Col. 3:12-17; 1 Tim. 6:11; Titus 3:1-3; James 3:17; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). A disciple especially embraces honesty, humility and holiness.

A disciple remembers that they are forgiven, honored and loved by God, which makes them open to instruction from others and from God. A disciple focuses their hopes on their eternal destiny (1 Pet. 1:13). A disciple purifies themselves of their destructive passions, which Scripture refers to as crucifying the "flesh." However, we do this by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13), not purely by our own strength. A disciple does not make it a priority to seek wealth, sensual pleasures, or earthly fame and power. A disciple forgives all offenses including offenses from their childhood, and a disciple loves their enemies. A disciple seeks the Kingdom of God first (Matt. 6:33), and God decides what earthly blessings one will receive.

A disciple speaks encouraging words, builds godly friendships, and learns to love their enemies. A disciple overcomes evil with good (Rom. 12:21) and becomes a tool for Jesus to use to defeat the Enemy's plans (Gen. 3:10; Eph. 6:12). A disciple grows in faith in God even when it seems dark. A disciple has an eternal perspective so they are free from the need for worldly rewards. A disciple treasures and participates in the community of God's people. They show kindness, speak the truth in love, bear the burdens of others and allow others to bear their burdens. A disciple has a humble servant's heart and rejoices in the success of others. Disciples teach each other, encourage each other, sing with each other and caution each other.

A disciple contributes their spiritual gifts to a community of believers so all may grow up into Christ as one (Eph. 4:15). A disciple walks in the Spirit and is continuously filled with the Spirit. In order to walk in the Spirit a disciple remains honest and open before the Spirit. A disciple operates in the power of the Spirit so that God can accomplish his supernatural will in ourselves

and others. This is what a disciple looks like, and these are the kinds of people Jesus instructed his disciples to develop when he commanded them to “make disciples.”

It is essential to our progress in maturity that our life is identified with Jesus’ life. Our whole Christian life can be summed up as participation in Christ’s life, Cross and Resurrection. The way of the Cross is a major theme in the New Testament. Romans 6:2-3 states: “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” Romans 8:17 states: “[We are] fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” We must suffer like he did in order to be complete, just as Jesus was made “perfect by sufferings” (Heb. 2:10). We crucify our fleshly body (Rom. 8:13; Eph. 4:22) and die to self (Matt. 16:24), and in this way we experience the “fellowship” of his sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

We also participate in the “power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). This is power for Christformation from the inside out. Christformation happens as we stay focused on Jesus. In this way, believers “beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Since this power is Christforming we are empowered to do the same works Jesus did.

Thus, we are born again, we die daily, we rise daily, and when Jesus returns we will receive a glorious body like his and a Christformed inner self. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22).

God’s New Covenant Succeeds In Producing Christlike People

The Old Covenant did not succeed in producing godly followers of God. But God’s New Covenant has succeeded in producing living examples of New Adams in history. Most of their lives have not been recorded, but some stand out in history. Examples of Christlike people in history include Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Gerard Groote, John Calvin, John Bunyan, and John Wesley. They all influenced many others toward Christlikeness.

Throughout the centuries the “army” of the followers of Christ have been sacrificing their lives and learning to love and forgive. They have been lights for good in a destructive world. They have conquered evil with virtue and invited all nations into the kingdom of God.

The Destiny of the New Adams

All these dynamics lead to the future hope and destiny of God’s people. He is preparing each believer to become citizens of the New Earth, New Jerusalem and New Eden (which are essentially the same). In other words, since God is generating a new perfect creation culminating

in the New Heaven and New Earth, each member must become perfect to be fit for this new creation.

Love is the supreme virtue because God's goal is community, and love "binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14). Each member of the body is called to grow in Christlikeness until they are finally perfected by God when Jesus returns at the dawn of the new age of the fullness of the kingdom and new creation begins. Then God will complete the resurrection of each believer by giving them a new body like Jesus' resurrected body.

Jesus will return to earth and lead a final defeat of Satan and evil (Rev. 20:10).

We will see Jesus, which will transform us into his image and lead us into spiritual marriage with him. This is the consummation of the union of love that began and grew in each believer's earthly life. Then each member will appear before Christ who will reward each one according to their Christlike deeds, (II Cor. 5:10) and character, (II Pet. 1:5-11). Christians who neglect God will suffer the loss of rewards they could have had (I Cor. 3:15). Those who follow well will receive individual rewards (I Cor. 3:14, Luke 19:16-19; Eph. 6:8; II John 8). These rewards will be highly valued in eternity.

After Jesus returns and completes the destruction of evil and the deceiver, God will complete his regeneration of creation by finally creating a New Heaven and New Earth and the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven. This is the city of the people of God, which is the bride of Christ adorned with beauty as the image of God (Col. 3:10) is fully restored in her members who are now fully Christformed. She will be a temple of God and the new Garden of God. In his wisdom, the latter Garden will surpass the former so God's glory will not suffer loss because of the interim of fallenness. The citizens will shine with God's glory, and they will behold him directly. The bride and groom will consummate their marriage, and the bride will finally possess her beloved. Our union with Christ will be complete.

Humans will finally fulfill their callings in Genesis 1:28 to "be fruitful and . . . fill the earth and subdue it." The planet will finally be freed from its groaning (Rom. 8:22) and bondage to corruption (Rom. 8:21) and restored to Edenic harmony. The saints will reign over the earth and beautify it. They will develop their skills, leadership and creativity. God will fulfill all their desires.

Their marriage with God will grow for eternity. The "city" will be the long-awaited fulfillment of the perfected community of love with God and his followers.

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