
THE STORY

A personal *mennofest*¹ of Darrell Ben Hershberger. September 23, 2006

The story I'm about to tell has three parts. The first is about God, how he made the world, and how Adam and Eve messed it up. The second part is about what happened in the world after Adam and Eve messed it up, before God stepped in to fix it. The third part is about how God intervened in the world to make it right again and how he is still working on that right now, and how we are a part of the effort.

The first first thing in the world was God. Well, really, I guess he wasn't in the world, 'cause at that time there was no world. I guess he was just the first, first thing in the whole universe. Well, I guess he wasn't the first thing in the universe either, because he was before the universe. So, the first first thing in *anything*, and in *nothing*, was God.

God was this living being, and he was totally *everything*. I mean that! Since there wasn't anything besides him, not even space, he was *it*. He was always there, too, and didn't have a beginning. By that I mean he wasn't born like a person. He didn't grow up, or mature, or get smarter, or get older, or anything like that. He was just there, and was God.

¹ A *mennofest* is a manifesto written by a Mennonite.

But don't imagine for one second that God was getting lonely or bored being by himself in the middle of, well, himself. That's because God was able to have relationships within himself, because he was made up of three different parts. At one time, and this must have been a long long time ago, God decided that he wanted a son, so he had a son², and this son is the person we call Jesus. So it was God and Jesus, and this other being called the Holy Spirit (I'm not sure when he came on the scene). So there you have God, now a father, and his son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and the three are out there in the middle of nothing, and I expect they were having a really good time. The reason they were having a really good time was because they really loved each other a lot.

One day, God decided to create something. I think it was because he had so much love, and he wanted an object on which to pour out his love. God was also a very creative person, and this natural creativity, combined with his love, made it nearly inevitable that he would create something. So he came up with this incredible creation, and in a matter of 6 days or so, produced the world that we inhabit today, including man and all the animals and living things, and of course the rest of the universe.³ The most special part of his creation, at least from our point of view, was the humans, and he made these in his image, which means that their essential makeup was a close approximation of the makeup of God himself. Since God was a being without a body, it does not mean they were physically like him, but they were natured after him.

² The origins of Jesus: 1 John 4:9 says that God "sent his only begotten son into the world." (KJV) *I realize now that this belief about Jesus origins is a heresy, because Jesus never had a beginning point either. I left it in here because I haven't researched the issue enough to warrant a change of mind.*

³ To be technical, Jesus actually created the world, as shown in Joh 1:3,10; 1Co 8:6; Eph 3:9; Col 1:16,17; Heb 1:2,10; Re 3:14.

He started out with one man and one woman, Adam and Eve, and for the first while enjoyed a perfect relationship with them. Adam and Eve were perfect people, living together in a perfect world, enjoying the perfect environment of the garden that was their home. God enjoyed the newly made objects of his love and was happy. Adam and Eve enjoyed the wonderful fruit of their garden and were happy. God enjoyed the world he had made with complete satisfaction. All that he wanted to happen on the world he had made happened, and happened perfectly. All was perfect in God's universe, all, that is, except for one member of his creation.

That imperfect particle of God's creation was an angel named Lucifer. At some point around or before the creation of the world, angels came on the scene. These were beings intended, as far as I can tell, to be God's personal assistants. Originally they were perfect, perfectly submitted to God's will and perfectly at one with him. All that changed on the day Lucifer decided he wanted to be "like the most high."⁴ Of course this was impossible, God being the force that filled everything that was, so God had no choice but to kick him out.

So Adam and Eve lived in this perfect world enjoying fellowship with God, and everything in the universe was peachy, except for one member of it, and that was Lucifer, who had rebelled. Since Lucifer's ultimate aim was to overthrow God, he thought of a way to spoil God's new

⁴ This theory of Lucifer's fall is not well founded, the only scripture referring to it being Isaiah 14:12, 13 "

Isaiah 14:12 *"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations!*

13 For you have said in your heart: 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation On the farthest sides of the north;'" (NKJV)

However, this scripture appears to be talking about Nebuchadnezzar, and calling him Lucifer, and not actually referring to any act of Satan himself.

creation. He got up one morning, zipped on his snake suit, and went crawling out in the garden to see what he could do.

He found the woman Eve and made conversation. “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” (Genesis 3:1, NIV) Eve told him that no, God had not said that, but had said that they could eat from all the trees in the garden except the one in the middle, and if they ate from that one, they would die. Eve was telling the truth. God had told them just that, not to eat from this certain magical tree called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Incredibly, this was the only command that God had given them. In a perfect world with one rule, it seems that perfection would have been simple to maintain. Had it not been for the loser Lucifer interfering, perhaps it could have been maintained.

“You will not surely die,” lied Lucifer. “In fact, if you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

The woman took the fruit and ate it! She gave some to Adam and he ate it! As they stood there munching the forbidden apples, they suddenly noticed one little detail about themselves which they had never thought about before. *They were naked.* Why this had never occurred to them before I really don’t know. I guess a better question would be why they suddenly noticed it now. The reason has something to do with them now knowing good and evil, a knowledge they acquired by eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Now they knew what was right and wrong, and something about being naked to them seemed clearly wrong. They didn’t like it. They were ashamed, so they took a few leaves and tried to cover themselves.

Well, of course God was extremely disappointed in his new creation, because they had broken his one rule. He had left it up to them, whether or not they would obey, because he valued very

much their free and voluntary commitment to him. While they were in that state of oneness with him the world remained perfect as he had created it. But once they acted in opposition to his wishes, it was impossible for the original plan to continue.

And so God came down and gave them their sentence. For the woman, her pain and sorrow would be greatly multiplied, particularly the pain of childbirth. Additionally, her “desire would be for her husband.” What that signifies I have no clue. Also, she would now be ruled by her husband. Previously, I guess there was no need for Adam to be in charge, since they always agreed on everything since they were perfect.

Adam received some very heartbreaking news as well. The very ground on which they stood would now be cursed, and weeds and thistles would grow all over the place. He would have to fight nasty and annoying plants. He would have to work and sweat just to have enough food to eat until he died. Ah, that was the other bit, he would die. Before the apple fiasco, his body was so perfect, so free from any defect, that he would have lived forever. But now he was sentenced to die. Imagine a person with a perfect body: no bad breath, no rotten teeth, no baldness, no body odor, no sickness ever, not even a runny nose, and even at 150 years old this person would look like they were 20. That was Adam before he messed up. Not so now. And even worse, this curse of mortality extended to Eve, so that she would die too, and worse yet it extended to the entire creation so that plants, animals, rocks, and trees received similar fates. There was no end to the harm done by a simple act of disobedience. The fall, for that is what the simple disobedience is known as, was incomprehensibly terrible.

In terms of the damage caused by the fall, the worst was the damage done to human nature. God had created the first two humans with a perfect nature, a nature that was at its very core in perfect

sync with God. Humans enjoyed effortless and fulfilling fellowship with God and performed his will without hindrance from themselves. However, all this drastically changed after the fall. Selfishness became the operative force within human nature. People began caring most about their own needs, their own bodies, their own activities, their own possessions, their own everything, as opposed to caring most about the things outside of them, the things of God. In a way this perversion was almost an evil necessity, because the world which had once been filled with God and goodness had become a world where that goodness was lessened and mixed with much evil, and to survive in this world selfishness seemed necessary.

That is the story of the beginning of the world and the fall of man. The first bit, about God being the first thing and then having a son and then creating the world, is a little bit my conjecture but mostly comes from ideas found in a book called the Bible. The second bit, about Adam and Eve and how they fell, is nearly exactly like you would find it in the Bible, and I believe it really happened this way, somewhere between six and ten-thousand years ago.

Part two of the story begins where part one ends, right after The Fall. Adam and Eve went on to have a few children, how many I don't know. In a conflict involving God and sacrifices, one of the boys, Cain, killed another boy, Abel. I find it incredible that in such a short time after the world had fallen from perfection, murder was committed. It goes to show that people then were much the same as people now. After the murder, Cain was reprimanded by God and made into a wanderer and vagabond. Other of Adam and Eve's children produced and reproduced and formed great and impressive family trees, whose records are recorded in the Bible. Enoch, one of Adam's near descendants, walked with God. Apparently even though Adam and Eve had destroyed the perfect relationship between them and God, "walking" with God was still possible, and Enoch did it.

However, in spite of people like Enoch, the world as a whole was not behaving as God had intended. People got very wicked, which means they did their own thing and did not do what God wanted them to do. Eventually it got so bad that God was sorry that he had ever made people at all.⁵ He decided he would destroy them all, all except for a couple people that were not wicked. So he destroyed them all, all except for Noah and his family, who listened to God and built this huge boat in the middle of dry land before the flood came.

The next noteworthy person to be born was Abraham. The most noteworthy thing about this man, according to the Bible, was his faith in God. Abraham trusted and believed in God so much that he did things that to us seem insane. For example, once God told him to sacrifice (kill) his only son Isaac. Even though Isaac was Abraham's only son, one that had been a special gift from God, Abraham proceeded to obey God's command, and went up on top of a mountain with his son to kill him and sacrifice him to God. Just as he was getting ready to slash his son's throat, the Angel of God called Abraham by name and told him to stop. It was just a test, but Abraham passed it with top honors.

In many other ways Abraham demonstrated his strong belief in God. When he and his brother in law Lot were settling in a new part of the country and deciding who would get what, Abraham very graciously let Lot have the best parcel of land, believing that God would take care of him with his inferior land. When Lot was a resident of Sodom, a wicked city that God eventually destroyed, Abraham pleaded with God that he would save Lot, and God listened to him. When Abraham was very old, about a hundred years old, he believed that God would give him a son,

⁵ Open Theism, here you go. Why was God sorry he made man, if he knew they would do this? I don't know, but the verse that mentions this is Genesis 6:6 (NKJV) "And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."

and God did. All of this faith in God pleased God very much, and he favored Abraham for it. The ultimate honor came when God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, and that his descendants would be God's special children.

God showed by these special honors that he really appreciated Abraham's faith. Abraham's faith, or full confidence in God, meant that he was able to experience much more of the same sort of relationship with God that God had originally intended in the beginning. It had been a long time since the creation of the world. Many people had forgotten God, and faith in God was a remarkable thing.⁶

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Skip approximately 4,000 years of world history, to be done later. Go to New Testament
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⁶ But Abraham did not always have much faith. Once, before Isaac, the promised son, was born, Abraham had a child with his slave woman, and this child Ishmael, ended up being a great bane to Abraham's legacy, because his descendants were forever in enmity with the descendants of Isaac.

And finally God moved to resolve the world disaster that Adam and Eve had created on that fateful day. He really did move. He came to earth. The part of him that came was Jesus, the son. This is part three of the story, where God intervened in the world to make right the problems created by Adam and Eve.

The enormity of this event cannot be exaggerated. God became man, God came to earth, God lived on earth for over 30 years, God experienced the messy human birthing process, God had to wear diapers, God got tired and had to sleep, God learned how to walk, God learned how to talk, God had people get mad at him, and eventually, God had people killing him. Not much in the human experience was missed by God.

The story begins with a baby being born to a couple named Mary and Joseph. The baby was Jesus, the son of God, and was born to Mary even though she never had sexual relations with a man, because the baby was conceived through a miracle of the Holy Spirit, so she was able to have a virgin birth. Although Jesus was a real human child, his childhood was marked by remarkable events, such as a group of wise men from the East traveling far to worship him, then being pursued for his life by the evil ruler of Judea, and going to Egypt with his family to find safety. At 12 years of age Jesus was found by his parents in the temple among the teachers, “both listening to them and asking them questions.” Everyone that heard him, of course, was “astonished at his understanding and answers.”⁷ His parents, meanwhile, were on a desperate search for him, not knowing where he was. When they found him and asked him why he had

⁷ Luke 2:46,47

done this to them, he replied with “Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?”⁸

We don't know a lot about what Jesus did as a child, but his father was a carpenter,⁹ and it seems likely that he would have helped his father in the family business. Otherwise, we are told that “the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.”¹⁰

When Jesus was about 30, he went out and was baptized by a man named John the Baptist, and began a three year period of public ministry, doing and saying all sorts of extraordinary things. At the end of the three years he was killed, but then he came back to life, and shortly after left the earth with his body and went to heaven. After he left the earth his disciples continued the work which Jesus had started, traveling all over the middle-eastern world teaching about him, and within a matter of decades a powerful movement of followers of Jesus, known as Christianity, was sweeping over the civilized world. Today, in 2006, that movement has grown to 2.1 billion adherents, 33% of the world population.¹¹

So what did Jesus do in his short life that can explain this incredible phenomenon? The answer is simple. Jesus gave himself. God realized that the only way he was going to be able to make up the damages caused by the fall was by making a huge sacrifice on his part, and so he did just that, through Jesus.

⁸ Luke 2:49

⁹ Mark 6:3

¹⁰ Luke 2:40

¹¹ http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html#Christianity

Jesus gave in so many ways when he was here. Jesus gave by healing people of their physical sicknesses. Jesus gave by giving people food when they were hungry. Jesus gave by giving words of life to people that were confused and unsure of how to find God. Jesus gave assurances of future life in heaven. At the end of his life on earth, Jesus gave all he could possibly give. He gave his life. He died. And in doing that he gave the ultimate gift to humanity—eternal life. It was through this gift that some of the effects of man's fall away from God were reversed.

This is no time to discuss the finer theological points of just what Jesus death accomplished. A very simple explanation will do. Because Adam and Eve and everyone after them had not done what God wanted them to do, they were doomed to die, and after death be separated from God forever. God hated this, but there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing, that is, except make a huge sacrifice of some kind on his part. Jesus' death was that huge sacrifice, because when he died, he intentionally took the blame for all the bad things everyone in the world ever did and ever would do, and then he died to show that he accepted the consequences for all those bad things, so that people would be freed from those consequences, and could again enjoy the life which God had originally given people when he created them in the beginning.

Jesus did not pick an easy method when he went about dying. He was actually killed, and killed in one of the cruelest ways known to man at that time. He was crucified, nailed to a wooden cross and left to suffer in terrible pain. If dying was what it took, there certainly would have been more comfortable ways of doing it. But if God wanted to be comfortable, he would have stayed away from the earth altogether.

And he didn't stop with dying. He came back to life, in an event known as the resurrection. In the resurrection he accomplished as much or more as he did when he died. When he came back

to life, he won a great victory over the devil (previously referred to as Lucifer). The devil apparently would have been very happy if Jesus would have stayed dead, and probably tried awfully hard to keep him that way. But he did not stay dead for long. After only 2 nights and 1 day of being without life, he came out of his tomb, and resumed relationships with his disciples, who thought they would never see him again. Through his coming back to life, Jesus was able to give his disciples power over the devil as well, so they could rise out of their old habits of being bad and start doing things that pleased God.

However, even though Jesus came to restore that which was lost in the fall, he did not restore everything. Instead, he restored what mattered most to God, and that was making sure the people he created could have eternal life and be with him forever. He did not restore nature to its pre-fall perfection. Neither did he remove the curse of pain for men and women, or the curse of natural bodily death. But he restored the most important thing—the ability of humans to relate well to their father God and to live forever with him.

Now even though we've established that the most important thing that Jesus did while he was here was to give himself for people, there was more to his coming than that. In fact, Jesus made a lot of different statements about why he came, and I will list a sample of them right here:

- John 3:16,17 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." [CAME TO SAVE]
- Matthew 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." [CAME TO FULFILL]

- John 9:39 "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." [CAME TO JUDGE]
- Matthew 10:34–35 "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" [CAME TO ???]

Later, followers of Jesus made statements about why Jesus came. Here are two:

- 1 Timothy 1:15 "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."
- 1 John 3:5 "And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin."

In looking at these statements and many others like them it is obvious that Jesus' primary reason for coming to earth was to take away the sins of the people and give them eternal life. He achieved this through his death and resurrection. However, I believe that another hugely important aspect of Jesus being here was his life and teachings. Jesus made very few statements that indicate that one of his main purposes for being here was to teach us and show us how to live. However, he did an awful lot of both teaching and living, and to ignore either simply because he did not make a big deal out of them would be sheer folly. Jesus expected people to take him seriously, but he did not push himself onto people, instead pointing them to God his father.

People should pay attention to Jesus' life because Jesus, in addition to being God, was also a man. That gave him the unique ability to model the sort of life that God wishes everyone would live, even in the fallen world. He experienced temptations to sin like other humans experienced,

and the way he responded to those temptations is instructive to the way people should respond to temptations. At least three statements in the Bible command us to model our lives after Jesus' life:

- Philippians 2:5 "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."
- 1 John 2:6 "He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked."
- 1 Peter 2:21 "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps."¹²

Jesus himself said "Go and make disciples of all nations." These were his parting words to those who were already his disciples. A disciple is one who follows a master—a learner, a pupil. These disciples that he was addressing were people who literally followed Jesus as he went from place to place, who absorbed and obeyed his teachings, and who learned how to live from the way he lived. Jesus was commanding them to go out and produce other disciples, and he included in this mandate the directive to teach "them to observe all things that I have commanded you." So here, in these parting words of Jesus known as the Great Commission, Jesus established discipleship and obeying his teachings as something to be taught to all the people in the world.¹³

¹² This "in his steps" passage is talking primarily about emulating the response of Christ to suffering and ill-treatment. However, it establishes that Jesus lived a life worthy of emulation. 1 Peter 2:20-23 "For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;"

¹³ But like I've already mentioned, Jesus did not explicitly command emulation of his life in any regard. The principle of Jesus' life as model for people's lives is based more on his unique God-Man makeup and on his living a perfect life, one that is without question a worthy model.

Of course, not everything about Jesus' life was meant to be emulated. For example, he did not marry, but neither did he condemn marriage, rather giving teaching on how married people ought to act. Jesus lived much of his life as a wanderer, apparently not having regular lodging much of the time, but he did not command his followers to do the same.

The things that ought to be emulated in Jesus life include things like his responses to suffering and ill-treatment, as Peter pointed out in 1 Peter 2, his incredible humility and servanthood, as Paul pointed out in Philippians 2, and his near-desperate dependence on his father, which we see modeled so often throughout the Gospels. Of course there are many other ways of living and giving that Jesus did just as they ought to be done. If his followers want to know how to do them, they should study his life as recorded in the Bible, and determine through discernment and prayer which aspects of Jesus life ought to be emulated, then seek by his help to emulate them.

Jesus did a lot of teaching when he was on the earth. He told people lots of things about God and how to live in the world God had made. He often spoke in parables, stories which were illustrated a truth he was trying to present. Sometimes people liked what he said, and other times they thought it was strange and hard to understand. He spoke much of a certain kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven, of which he was a part and which he wanted people to be a part.

After Jesus died and rose and returned to heaven, his followers continued on with the program that Jesus had begun, and with the Kingdom which he had so often spoken of. They spread his teachings and his manner of living, and most of all the good news of his giving life to people, to as many people as they could. They produced extensive writings, and taught people how to be disciples and repeated what Jesus had taught. Many of these writings were collected and brought

together in a book called the New Testament, which his followers today esteem as the very words of God and authoritative over matters of life and belief.

God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit continue on, interacting with the world they created and hoping more people will follow Jesus and take his gift of life. God is sorry for all the wretchedness and evil in the world, but knows that he doesn't want to force people to love him and choose his way, because love by definition is free and cannot be forced. Eventually God will end the world as we know it, and the people that love and follow him will be with him, and the rest will be in a place of torment. But he is waiting, not wanting to bring the world to an end until more people can come to him.

[All Scripture Quotations from NKJV]

Appendix A. The Nicene Creed

This creed, developed by a council in 325 and further modified in 384, expresses my beliefs about basic Christian truths.

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:
And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds;
God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God;
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,
by Whom all things were made:
Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man:
And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried:
And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures:
And ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father:
And he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead:
Whose Kingdom will have no end:
And I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord, and Giver of Life,
Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified,
Who spake by the Prophets.
And I believe in One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church,
I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.
And I look for the Resurrection of the Dead:
And the Life of the world to come. Amen.

Appendix B: Miscellaneous Beliefs.

- The Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God. It was written by humans inspired by the Holy Ghost, and is infallible and inerrant, excepting certain trivialities, in the original manuscripts.
- We need to culturally contextualize the message of the word of God to make real life applications, but in the process we must not pervert the plain intent of God in his word. For example:
 - The New Testament principle of women as highly valuable contributors in the church and equal with men in worth, yet submissive in their role, and “silent” in church is relevant for all times and places.
 - The New Testament principle of women covering their heads and men not covering theirs as a symbol of authority is relevant for all times and places.
- Eternal life comes through Jesus Christ alone and is given freely, and is accessed by faith through the free will of man.
- People who are not saved will go to eternal punishment in hell.
- People who have not heard of Christ can still be saved through the general revelation and experience of Christ.
- Saving faith in Christ cannot be separated from following Christ.
- Love is the most powerful force in the universe.
- Christians are to love each other and all men, and are not to kill other people.
- Christians who follow Christ will be different in word and deed from those people who serve themselves or Satan. Nonconformity to the world happens by default to sincere Christians, and is not something to be sought for its own sake. Christians are to be active in the world of nonbelievers, while maintaining separation from evil.
- Married people are not to divorce, unless there is fornication, but people that have divorced are not to get remarried. If they do they live in a continuous state of adultery.