

The People's Bible Teachings

MAN

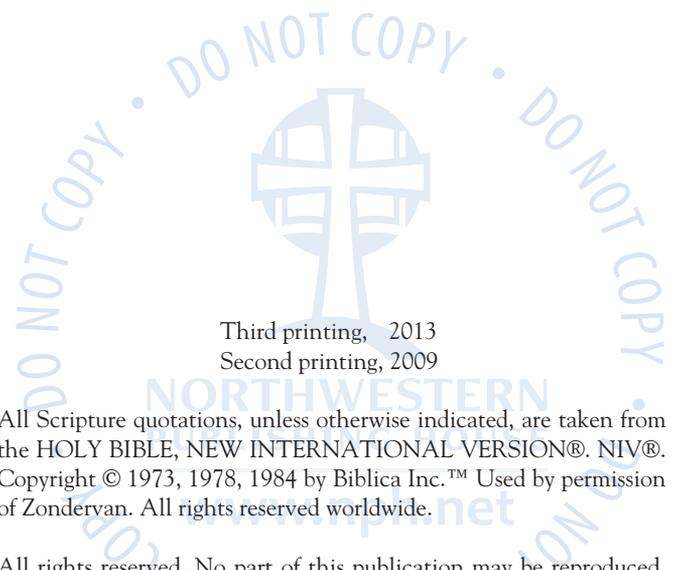
From Glory to Ashes and Back

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Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

On a clear night, lift your eyes to the heavens. How many stars do you see? Astronomers say there are some six thousand stars visible to the naked eye. Look into a telescope, and you can see even more.

Those who make the sky their lifestudy estimate that there may be over one hundred billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy alone. Astronomers also estimate that there may be one hundred billion galaxies. Some stars are thought to be 16 billion light-years from the earth. One light-year is a distance of 5.88 trillion miles! The size of some stars also boggles the mind. One giant star, called Betelgeuse (pronounced like *beetle juice*), has a diameter several hundred times that of the sun.

How small is Earth when compared to the great masses and vast distances of the other bodies in the universe! Smaller still is the sum of humanity that inhabits Earth. Poor, helpless man* . . . helpless before natural catastrophes like earthquakes and floods . . . helpless before the winds and the tides.

The psalmist asked God, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Psalm 8:4). The question begs for an answer. What is man that the powerful God who created this marvelous universe would pay any attention to him? And why would God want to sacrifice his only Son on a cross to take away man's sins?

*Throughout this book the author uses the term *man* and the masculine pronouns to refer to the human race and to human nature in the interest of simplicity and brevity and in accordance with time-honored usage. No demeaning of the female sex is intended.

Yes, what is man? What is man's origin? What is his worth? What are his capabilities? What is his destiny? At one extreme, the disciples of New Age philosophy believe that man is God. At the other extreme, evolutionists teach that man is only a highly developed animal and the product of chance. But the Bible tells us that man is neither God nor animal. Man is God's special creature whom he dearly loves and watches over.

What is man? That is the question we will address in this book. We are convinced that the correct answer to this question can be learned only from God. Only our Creator knows our true worth and capabilities. Only our Creator knows the truth about our origin and destiny. He knows us much better than we know ourselves.

In the following pages, we intend to let God himself tell the story of man as he reveals it in the Bible. It is a fascinating account. It is a story that follows man from glory to ashes and back.

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Part I

Glory

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1

The Glorious Purpose of Man

What is the purpose of our lives? Why are we here? In our hectic society, many of us rush back and forth, chasing from one urgent task to another. The things that often fill our lives and our mindless haste in doing them may betray the fact that our lives have no real direction. We may even be going in the wrong direction! But overwhelmed by the crush of everyday duties and obligations, we find little time to consider such a profound subject as the reason for our existence. It would seem such a matter is better left to theologians and philosophers.

Yet everyone sets personal goals. Everyone has reasons for living. This may not always be evident in what we say, but it is evident in how we live. For some people the pur-

pose of life is accumulating wealth, acquiring knowledge, or pursuing respect from their peers. Others live unselfishly for family and friends. Still others simply live to have a good time.

God's purpose for us

But what is the purpose God has in mind for us? The Bible says God created us for his glory (Isaiah 43:7). He created us and placed us on Earth to serve him and glorify his name. That is why the apostle Paul wrote, "Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). From the moment we rub the sleep from our eyes one morning to the moment we wake up the next morning, God wants everything we do to glorify him. Jesus told his disciples, "Let your light shine before men" (Matthew 5:16). Why? Not that *they* might be praised, but that others might see their good deeds and praise *their Father in heaven* (verse 16). Similarly, Peter encouraged his readers to declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). The Bible repeatedly tells us that God wants us to glorify him, to give him honor, to show everyone what a wonderful, kind, loving, and generous God he is.

Everything created for God's glory

It shouldn't surprise us that God created us for his glory. The Bible tells us that this is the purpose for all creation. Consider Paul's words to the Romans: "From him [God] and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!" (Romans 11:36). "*From him . . . are all things*" reminds us that God is the source of everything. Only because of him do we have life and existence. "*Through him . . . are all things*" reminds us that we pros-

per only by his blessing. Every good thing comes through him. “To him are all things” reveals the ultimate purpose of all creation: to give praise and glory to God.

The angels are repeatedly urged by God to praise him (Psalm 103:20,21; 148:2), which shows the purpose for which these powerful and magnificent creatures were created. Even inanimate things glorify God. In Psalm 148 the sun, moon, and stars, the mountains, and even lightning and hail are called upon to praise him. And lest we think that the things God created without breath and vocal cords cannot accomplish their task of praising God, God tells us that the heavens declare his glory (Psalm 19:1).

Everything God made testifies to his power, wisdom, and goodness. The sun, the moon, the oceans, even the frogs—all glorify God by being what he intended them to be.

Only man rebels

Of all God’s creation, only sinful man rebels at the thought of glorifying the Creator. Think of our own poor attitudes toward public worship. We would hasten to say we don’t hate God; we just don’t always have time for him! We are preoccupied with our work, our families, our recreation, and the various responsibilities of life. But according to God’s point of view, we *do* hate him according to our sinful nature (Romans 8:7). Lack of love is hatred, as far as God is concerned (Matthew 12:30).

Every day God pours his blessings upon people who choose to ignore him. Every day he gives us air to breathe and water to drink. He gives us jobs, families, time, and money. And what do we do? We use God’s generosity against him! Our preoccupation with God’s blessings becomes the reason we have no time or money for him!

People who have no time for God are like a spoiled little boy who has a birthday party. He invites all kinds of people to his party. But he really doesn't care who comes, how long they stay, or whether they have a good time. He only cares about their gifts. In fact, he wouldn't mind if they would just drop off their gifts at the door and leave. He wants the gifts, but he doesn't want the people who bring them. Similarly, many people want all the gifts God can give them, but they want nothing to do with him.

God loves his world

It was not God's intention to give his gifts and then walk away. God did not place a plastic bubble around creation, which he vowed never to penetrate. He has not imposed on himself an exile from the world he made. From the very beginning, God did not want man to experience a life without him. Instead, God demonstrated that he wanted man to have a loving, personal relationship with his Creator.

The book of Genesis suggests that God communicated with man regularly in the Garden of Eden. God walked and talked with Adam and Eve. The Bible is filled with instances in which God lovingly interfered in his world to care for his human creatures. For example, God saved Noah from the flood (Genesis 6–8), rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1–14), and fed Elijah at the brook Kerith (1 Kings 17:1-6). God did not create this world and then walk away and ignore it.

In thankful response to God's eternal love and watchful care, man is expected to serve God. Man is not to center his life on himself or the world. He is to center

his life on God. Indeed, his whole purpose in life is to glorify God.

Is God selfish?

Some people object to the idea that God created everything for his own glory. They claim this is unworthy of God, because it makes him proud and selfish. The church has always answered this objection, first of all, by saying it is *unscriptural*. The Bible plainly says God created us for his glory (Isaiah 43:7) and that “the LORD works out everything for his own ends” (Proverbs 16:4). Second, the objection is *unreasonable* because it judges God by human standards. Third, the objection is *humanistic* because it attempts to put man in God’s place. If the world were not made for God’s glory, then it must have been made for man’s. Then man becomes the end goal of all creation and the focal point of all history! God is forced to kneel at man’s feet.

What nobler or more acceptable purpose could man have than to glorify God? In Job 38 God reminds Job that he laid the earth’s foundation (verse 4), shut up the sea behind doors (verse 8), walked in the recesses of the deep (verse 16), and sent the lightning bolts on their way (verse 35). In chapter 39 God says he knows when the mountain goats give birth (verse 1), gives the ostrich swiftness (verse 18), gives the horse strength (verse 19), and makes the eagle soar at his command (verse 27). Two more chapters of Job list the mighty works of God. Our works are nothing compared to his. Why would we rebel at giving God the praise that is due him? Even worse, why would we try to steal that praise for ourselves?

The greatest thing God did for us was to carry out his plan of salvation, at which even the angels marvel (1 Peter 1:12). But *why* did God send his Son to die an

agonizing death on a cross? David gives us the answer in the familiar words of Psalm 23: “He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness *for his name’s sake*” (verse 3). He saves us for his name’s sake! God has a reputation for goodness among his saints, a reputation he maintains by saving us. Thus God intends to be glorified through our salvation.

At the same time, God’s plan of salvation cannot be considered selfish, because God carried out his plan for us. Because Jesus died, we live. Because Jesus was forsaken by God, we are embraced and welcomed by God into heaven. God’s plan of salvation is anything but selfish!

Living God’s purpose

God’s purpose for every one of us is that we might glorify him. In fact, sometimes God may have in mind a very specific way in which we can glorify him. The story of Esther illustrates this. Esther was the wife of the vain and temperamental King Xerxes of Persia. Under the influence of a very persuasive government official named Haman, Xerxes decreed that on a certain day every Jew in the Persian empire was to be killed. Esther was faced with a dilemma. Xerxes did not know she was a Jew. If she said nothing about this matter to him, all her people would die. If she revealed her identity and asked that her people be spared, she might be killed too.

Esther’s cousin Mordecai appealed to her to act. He said, “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). Who knows, Esther, if God has raised you up as queen for this very purpose, to save your people? The Bible tells us God gave Esther the courage to act, and she saved her people.

Like Esther, you and I tend to underestimate our significance. When we think of the countless worlds that make up the universe, we may see our world as just a small pebble compared to all the rest. When we think of the many years that make up human history, we may see ourselves as only one generation among many. When we think of the billions of people in the world, we may say, “I am only one person. What can I do?”

Yet God has a purpose for us, just as he had for Esther. He has placed us on Earth at this point in history for the purpose of glorifying him. With his help and with the talents he has given us, each of us is quite capable of contributing to his praise. In fact, by spreading the good news of our salvation, we may accomplish far more than we ever dreamed possible. Like Esther, we may save our people.

A matter of priorities

All of us have seen artists' sketches depicting space aliens with big bubble heads and small bodies with skinny arms and legs. Such sketches leave the impression that these beings have highly trained minds, but their physical development has been entirely neglected.

On the other hand, we may also have seen people who spend most of their lives down at the gym lifting weights. Their muscles bulge and ripple. They have necks as strong and thick as the average person's thigh. We marvel at their muscle development and physique. But what price have they paid? Have they perhaps concentrated so much on their physical development that they have neglected their mental development?

There is another side to man besides the mental and physical sides, however. There is also a spiritual side that needs development. The spiritual side of man—his rela-

tionship with God—needs attention. It needs to be given priority. Think of a well-balanced person who is athletic and articulate but doesn't know God. That person is a failure in God's eyes. He has neglected that part of his development which is most important of all. He is stunted spiritually. He is not living to glorify God. He has chosen to ignore God.

The world wants us to crowd our religion into a neat little compartment insulated from everyday life. Popular culture dictates that religion should be restricted to one hour on Sunday and should have absolutely no influence on life outside that one hour. The world's idea is that religion doesn't relate to real life. This is a world where people have to make a living. This is a world of power, money, and machines. God and religion don't fit in. The pressure to swallow such a secular way of thinking is relentless.

Secular humanism

One of the leading philosophies in our world is called *secular humanism*. To call something secular indicates it is concerned with earthly rather than spiritual matters. The word *humanism* reveals that this philosophy is centered on man. The principal concern of secular humanism is man—his relationship with himself, other people, and nature. Not all secular humanists are atheists, but the prevailing opinion among humanists is that whether God exists or not, man must live as though he didn't. Man's relationship with God is not important. Man has so many earthly needs, so many crises to solve in this world that he can't afford to turn his attention to God and the next world. Most secular humanists believe that God and religion distract people from concentrating on things of greater importance.

In the *Humanist Manifesto II*, issued in 1973, influential philosophers, scientists, educators, and psychologists set forth in summary form the most cherished principles of secular humanism. Among their statements were the following:

Religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species.

We can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species.

Humans are responsible for what we are or will become.

No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.

The human species is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces. There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body.

Moral values derive their source from human experience.¹

From just these few statements of this humanistic creed, it is easy to see that secular humanism is a blatant attempt by man to dethrone God. Though the Bible says God created man so that man might glorify and serve God (Isaiah 43:7), humanism says man should ignore God. Though the Bible says God has given us laws by which he commands us to live (John 14:15), humanism says man sets his own standards of right and wrong. Though the Bible says God will judge the world (Acts 17:31), humanism says man must determine his own actions. Man can control his own destiny.

Humanistic psychology

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), a humanistic psychologist, has had great influence in the field of modern psy-

chology. Freud believed that it is entirely natural for a criminal to act the way he does and that it is quite unreasonable for society to make a criminal stand trial for being his antisocial self. Furthermore, Freud did not believe man is responsible to any higher being. In fact, Freud considered all religious belief to be a neurotic illusion.

Freud's ideas laid the groundwork for the widespread denial of personal responsibility that abounds in modern American society. His influence led to the popular idea that people who commit crimes do so because of some experience or abuse they suffered in their childhood. Criminals, therefore, are not to be blamed. They are really victims of society. They are victims of their faulty upbringing and the weaknesses of the social systems around them. "Sin" is not in people but in the system. "Salvation" is not from God but is a matter of reordering or reeducating society. This lack of human responsibility, its attendant denial of guilt, and the idea of man's independence from God are recurring themes of humanism.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), another humanistic psychologist whose name is recognized by many people today, taught that morality is really a process of self-actualization. In other words, each person has internal qualities that should be allowed to develop naturally. According to Maslow, each person should be allowed to reach his unique potential by means of his own values and choices. Each person should determine for himself what is good or bad, right or wrong.² Maslow believed that it was unnecessary and even harmful to teach biblical morality. He also felt that morality and values must change as society changes. Maslow's opinion that man rather than God establishes morality is another recurring theme of humanism.

Modern psychology

Most modern psychologists are students of the humanistic psychologists who lived before them. That is why many psychologists today counsel their patients to deal with feelings of guilt by denying that they are responsible to God. They often tell their patients that they need not be concerned about the Ten Commandments. They tell their patients that if God does exist, he merely wants them to be happy. Therefore they need only to be true to themselves, following their own rules. Their own happiness ought to be their primary goal and ambition. Only one exception is made: they must be careful not to hurt others. However, even then, secular humanists tend to allow each person to determine whether his actions hurt others.

Our relationship with God

In contrast to the prevailing philosophy of secular humanism, we have seen that according to the Bible, man's relationship with God is of utmost importance. Man was created to enjoy a loving and personal relationship with God. Only when such a relationship exists can man be at peace and reach his full potential. Secular humanism turns the order of relationships around. Humanists say man must have a good relationship first with himself, then with others, then with nature.

But if the Bible teaches any lesson repeatedly, it is the importance of man's relationship with God and his complete dependence upon God. We see that lesson in the way the Old Testament presents the history of Israel. The Israelites grew into a mighty nation not because of their own efforts or because of mere accident but because God freed them from slavery in Egypt and blessed them.

Think of God's repeated warnings and encouragements that the Israelites might remain close to him, warnings given by Moses (Deuteronomy 4), Joshua (Joshua 24), Isaiah (Isaiah 1), and others. Whenever the Israelites fell away from God, they experienced nothing but trouble and misery.

Even kings of Israel, like Saul and Ahab, who thought they were above the law of God, felt the heavy hand of God's discipline, demonstrating that they were responsible to God. Saul came to a disgraceful end because he had forsaken God (1 Samuel 31:4). So did Ahab (1 Kings 21:19; 22:38). Not even kings could throw off the chains of God's commandments or oppose God successfully (Psalm 2:2-5). Again and again the lesson that every nation and every person is dependent on God and responsible to God is emphasized (Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 2 Kings 21:1-15; Isaiah 10:1-11; 13:1-23:18).

Thanks to God, there is a spiritual side to man so that man can know God and enjoy a loving, personal relationship with God. Thanks to God, man has a glorious spiritual purpose, to live to the glory of God. Thanks to God, there is a Savior who died on a cross to erase the times we have failed to carry out our God-given purpose. God has been good to us and is truly deserving of our highest praise.