

Creation and the Image of God



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Lord, thank You for the privilege that we have today, once again, to consider Your Word, and we thank you for the Bible, for what You've revealed to us. Thank You that we don't have to interpret astrological signs or anything from nature or try to come up with wild ideas of who You are or what You are about, but that You've revealed to us in Your Word who You are and what You are about in Your relationship with us. So make us diligent students, give us eyes that are keen to see what You revealed, hearts that are open to change as Your Spirit leads, and we pray it in Your Son's name, Jesus. Amen.

Today we're going to look specifically at the two components, creation and fall. Remember, of course, that when we talk about creation, we're talking about the very foundation of the biblical story. I would call it the framework of the biblical story. Creation begins the Bible and recreation ends the Bible. The very first words in the Bible, you all probably know them by heart: "In the beginning, God." In Hebrew, it doesn't necessarily point to a moment in time, but is an indicator of the start of a defined period of time. There are other Hebrew phrases that would talk to a singular event, but this phrase implies a period with an end. So the very first words of the Bible imply that there's a defined end to the Bible. "In the beginning, God" implies that God exists before creation; and we will argue and the Bible argues that God is eternal, not in any way bound or understood by normal categories of time. So God preexists creation, the Bible tells us; and we're going to argue then that God starts human history with His great creative act. If you want to talk about the bracket, look at Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning." Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I am making everything new," God says at the end.

Now I think it's important as well to kind of also step back from the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 and give you my perspective on what this piece of literature is at the beginning of the Bible. There are many different approaches that are taken to interpret Genesis 1 and 2. I'm going to argue that as this Scripture was composed,

I don't think it was written as a scientific theory or to prove any given scientific theory regarding the origins of the universe. I don't think it was written to give us a timetable for how the earth and the creation as we know it began. In other words, I'm not sure this piece of literature was written to tell us when and how God created. I think it is written to tell us who and why: who created and why creation came into existence. Now having said that, all of us have to admit a fair measure of a lack of knowledge related to the origins of the universe and the origins of creation, and always with a measure of humility approach this topic. But from a literary perspective, I think you can make the case—and certainly from the worldview of the author who composed it—that there was no intent or desire to lay out a particular theory of scientific origins or a scientific theory of origins in this passage.

So what do we know then about creation? How does it function through the rest of the Bible? We're going to call creation a foundation. We already said it's the foundation of the story of the Bible, but I think a creator or God as Creator is a foundation for how we understand God Himself. God is consistently portrayed throughout Scripture as Creator; and because He is Creator, therefore He can be said to be sovereign and worthy of our worship. God as Creator is a lynchpin, a building block upon which we understand who God is. He is sovereign over all, and His worth or His praiseworthiness to us is as a Creator, as God. I would encourage you to look at Job 38:4–7. That's where God almost mocks Job and says, Were you there, Job, when I laid the foundations of the earth? Were you there when I measured out the heavens? Were you there when I caused the waters to spring forth like a newborn baby? And of course the answer to all of those is no, no, no. Only God can make those claims. You can see those same kinds of claims in Psalm 104:5, as well as many other places throughout the Psalms themselves.

What you need to understand or what we need to understand, I think, is that many other ancient Near Eastern cultures, those peoples and cultures and religious systems that were in existence when Moses composed the book of Genesis—in fact, I think it would be safe to say, I'd have to verify this, but I think it's correct to say that all of them—all of the known ancient Near Eastern cultures at the time of the writing of the book of Genesis had their own creation stories, their own sense of awareness of who their gods were and how they were involved in creating. And so scholars who study these other creation stories will argue that Genesis 1 and 2 specifically addresses some of those other creation stories

and attempts, and I would argue does demonstrate that the story told by Moses is unique because it presents a unique God. A lot of work [has been] done in recent years on comparing Genesis 1 to the Egyptian creation stories, which came into existence about the time of the writing of the book, about Torah. So, when you read Genesis 1, remember that those who Moses wrote that book for would have been keenly aware that other cultures had other creation stories; and so the story that's presented in Genesis 1 is presented in a way to demonstrate that the God of Israel, Moses' God, is unique.

Now let me read you an extended quote, if I may. This comes from Alan Ross in his commentary on the Psalms called *Recalling the Hope of Glory*. He writes this: "The faithful in Israel certainly praised God for creation in their hymns and psalms. They were aware of the bizarre ideas about creation in the mythological beliefs of the pagans, and in striking contrast to them they declared in their holy writings that everything was created by the decree of the one true living God. The psalmist expresses this point precisely. Psalm 33:9, 'For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.' Here was the unambiguous witness," Ross goes on, "to the sovereignty of God, and this focus on His sovereign Word, His spoken Word, also provided a powerful instruction for the worshiping community. If all of creation exists because of the decree of God, then the way to life and blessing in God's presence would also be through obedience to God's Word." So Ross makes the case that, and he's correct, that out of all of these stories of creation and other religious systems, the Bible story is unique because God doesn't have to strive. He's not in some great cosmic battle. It isn't an effort against other elements that brings about creation or other gods. He speaks, and the world comes into existence. That, we would argue, makes the biblical record and the biblical God unique from these other stories.

It is not accidental that the New Testament picks up on the same themes that, because God is Creator, He is sovereign and worthy of our praise. You remember John 1:1–3, "In the beginning was the Word," a wonderful combination with Genesis 1 there. "And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him . . ." We know who He is because in 1:14 we read "the Word became flesh." This is Jesus. "Through him, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made."

Paul picks up the same theme about Jesus as the Sovereign Lord,

the Creator of all things. Colossians 1:15–17, “The Son,” Jesus, “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things,” which means supreme over all things, “and in him all things hold together.” There is never a distinction made in the Scripture between the God who creates in Genesis 1 and the Lord Jesus. They are one and the same. The triune God creates, attested by the Old Testament and the New Testament. Don’t ever make the mistake or allow people to lead you into some understanding that Jesus was not engaged in creation.

So when we think about creation and its importance in the story of the Bible, it gives us this clear picture that God is sovereign and worthy of praise, but it also reminds us and lets us know that God is a God who has acted to make Himself known. Creation itself occurs because of God’s desire to be known and worshiped. Theologians and the Scripture itself will tell us that God is presented as one who exists outside of time and space. He’s not bound by history, nor is He bound by geography or the universe or any other reality; and so God cannot be known unless He chooses to reveal Himself. And so the very act of God in creation is the first act of God revealing Himself to, ultimately, humanity. So God takes the initiative to be known, and I’m going to argue that God’s desire to be known and worshiped undergirds the whole story of God’s redemptive mission. Why does God create? Because He desires to be known and worshiped. Why does God redeem? Because He desires to be known and worshiped.

And so the question comes up, Then why does God desire to be known and worshiped? Does this imply some need on God’s behalf? Does it imply some egotistical, self-serving kind of motive from God to be known and worshiped? The case could be made in a very profane sense that those running for our nation’s highest office desire to be known and worshiped by those who would vote for them, but I’m afraid their motives are quite different than perhaps God’s.

God, we would say, as Creator reveals Himself to be a beneficent God. Beneficent is probably not a word you’ve used in the last week or so. We throw in these obscure long words at seminary to justify the price of tuition. God is beneficent means that God acts to seek the good of others. And so why does God desire to be known and worshiped? Because God knows that there is life only in knowing

and worshiping Him. He is the source of life, existing in eternity as a triune God. He exists in perfect satisfaction, in perfect love, and in perfect joy, so He desires to be known and worshiped out of His desire for humanity to experience joy and satisfaction in Him the way He experiences it in Himself. So God's motive in creation is for our benefit. It's beneficent, and some would say that you could even say God's act of creation is an act of His love. This of course reminds us of perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son." So just as God's desire for the good of humanity causes Him to reveal Himself in creation, it causes Him to ultimately reveal Himself as the Son of God in the sending of Christ, the second person of the Trinity.

So is creation an important theme in all of Scripture? I would argue it's one of those spines of Scripture that we see at the beginning and the end and creates a picture of God as sovereign, worthy of praise, stepping toward us, taking the initiative to be known and beneficent and desiring our good in all that He does.

What other foundation of our understanding in Scripture do we gain from the creation event or the creation story? And I'm going to argue, then, it provides a foundation for the way we understand us, the way we understand humanity. First, the position of creating humanity on the sixth day implies that all that has come before it is designed to lead to that climactic moment.

Several years ago—you may have heard me tell this story—several years ago, we were trying to have family devotions at our home. If you have an image of truly obedient children sitting around my feet waiting for the next word to drop from my mouth, you have a wrong image. Family devotions in our home frequently devolved into either discipline or hilarity. So at this particular time we had gathered for family devotions, and my wife and I wanted to talk about how God is good. And so we decided we would look at Genesis chapter 1, read the story, and every time the word *good* appeared, we'd emphasize it. "And so God saw that it was *good*. . . and God saw that it was *good*," and we said that over and over again. And so we got to the end of the story, and we said to our kids, why was the creation *good*? And they were supposed to say, "because God is *good*." However, one of our children, who shall remain nameless, had an amazing ability to say things that his parents could have never predicted would come out of his mouth.

And he looked at us and said, "Well, duh, it's *good* because we

can live here.” So I began to think back through that creation narrative; and all that’s created is an environment, contributes to the development of an environment necessary for humanity to survive. Light and water and living things, both flora and fauna. And when you think about who we are as people—our finitude, the limitations of what it means to be human—we couldn’t exist apart from the way God created the universe. And so, maybe he’s right. Maybe the whole creation narrative—days one through five—is designed to demonstrate how in God’s beneficence He creates a world wherein humanity can thrive. And when He creates humanity, we read that out of everything else that He has created, He creates humanity as His image.

So turn with me to Genesis 1. Genesis chapter 1, start in verse 26: “Then God said,” this is day six, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild creatures, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Verse 27, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Verse 28, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

Now you may have noticed that when I first talked about this idea of the image of God, I changed the language just a little bit. You may have noticed that I said, “God created humanity *as* His image.” And most interpretations in English would say that God created humanity *in* His image. This demonstrates a bit of a separation; not separation, two different approaches to understand the image of God and humanity. On the one hand, there is this idea that humanity is intrinsically different than the rest of creation. Again, to give you a big seminary word, this is called a substantivalist view, that there’s something substantially different about humanity from all of the rest of the created beings and the rest of creation, a view that’s been held throughout the history of the church, and certainly, as you’re going to see me or hear me say in a moment, has some validity.

But there’s another view of the image of God. The other view doesn’t focus so much on how humanity is intrinsically different. It focuses on the mandate of what humanity is supposed to do. So if you look at this idea in the context of the ancient Near East, kings and sovereigns in their territories would erect stone images

of themselves or of the god they were said to rule on behalf of, and those images demarcated that territory as their possession. Those images functioned to reveal the presence, the identity of the sovereign over that territory. And so, a lot of biblical scholars have said, why would Moses have used this language of image differently than the way it was used in that historical setting? And they argue that humanity is created as the image of God to represent and reveal Him as sovereign over the earth. And so some would call this a functionalist view of the image of God; and notice that humanity is called to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They're not the only ones who were called to be fruitful and multiply, but they're also called as God's image to rule over the earth, to exercise God's rule over creation. They are the agents of God's rule over creation.

So we're going to say, and I think it's right, that when God says that we are to fill the earth—to multiply, be fruitful, fill the earth—we are therefore to fill all of creation with His image, with the knowledge of the one true God as the Creator over all. So guess what? If that's true, then by our very nature of being human, we are imbued with the privilege to represent and reveal the one true God throughout all creation. That, I would argue, is an amazing privilege that provides dignity to humanity that none of the rest of creation bears, a unique privilege that you and I can represent and reveal the one true God just by the nature of our humanity.

There's an author that I've enjoyed by the name of Mike Mason. I'll tell a brief story from one of his books. I'm going to take it a little further than he did in his book, but I want to give him credit for the thought. Imagine that we are somewhere near Vancouver, British Columbia. Beautiful! One of the most beautiful places that I've ever been. And imagine that we're looking to the west at a sunset across the Pacific, and you know how that works in the Pacific. The sky just begins to ignite and explode in a beautiful array of orange and purple and red and colors that flow together in ways you've never seen before; and you're stunned by the beauty of that sunset. And then, because of where you are, you have the privilege of looking back to the east, to the snow-capped Rockies, and not only has the sun in the west exploded in color, that color is now reflected in the beautiful snowcap of those majestic mountains. Pretty spectacular, wouldn't you say, if you were to find yourself there?!

And then imagine that your revelry and even praise of God is interrupted by an odor. Not too far from you, you notice that there's

a person who has passed out and vomited all over themselves, lying in the gutter. Ask yourself this question: Where is more of God revealed in that scene? Was the sun created in the image of God or the sunset or the mountains or the snow? No. Humanity is the image of God. And even in its depravity, in our depravity, in Genesis 9, we are still said to be created as the image of God. Pretty stunning question, isn't it? Pretty striking to ask, Where is more of God revealed in that scene? One of the reasons depravity is so heinous—and we'll talk about that in just a moment—is that you take that which has the most potential to reveal and represent the one true God, and you diminish its capacity to do so.

Thanks be to God, who in Christ as the image of God, we have newness of life. Those who have believed in Jesus are a new creation and through the regeneration of the Spirit can return to the capacity of revealing the one true God as His image. What a privilege, is it not? In Genesis 2:7, we know that humanity is made alive to God. Not only are we made alive by God, but we are made alive to God.

Look at Genesis 2:7 with me. I love the way this story unfolds. There's some sweet irony in it. You know, you read Genesis 1:26–28, and humanity is the only part of creation created as God's image. As humans are, we might be likely to think that maybe we're God, but Genesis 2 reminds us that not really, because you're just made from dirt. That's the way the Scripture unfolds. Genesis 2:7, "Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." This phrase "the breath of life," the Hebrew word *neshama*, is uniquely used in the Bible for God and humanity. Other animals have breath. That's the Hebrew word *ruach*, which also by the way is translated to *spirit*. But only humans and God possess *neshama*. This, I think, does create a substantial difference between humans and the rest of creation. This word, I would argue (also used in Job 32:8 and in Proverbs 20:27, Job 32:8) likely indicates that humans, when they are breathed the *neshama*, are animated spiritually, that humans can relate to the one true God in a way that none of the rest of creation can relate to the one true God. Only we share that spiritual animation, the animation of the soul, if you will, that we don't see attested for other creatures. And we could argue that this, particularly in the Proverbs context, implies that humanity is given a conscience, that we can then have the capacity to make moral decisions that are consistent with this spiritual animation

we have through the *neshama*, the breath that God has uniquely breathed into us.

Humans also are created as those who are to serve in God's temple. Look with me at Genesis 2:15–17. It says, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'" This idea, the language that's used in Genesis 2:15 where it says that "the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden" is the language that's used for the priestly temple that comes later in the Scripture. In fact, the language of working it and caring for it is language that's used of those who perform the services in the temple. And so many believe, and I think rightly so, that what Moses has laid out for us in this chapter is that all of creation was to be God's temple. Remember, when the Israelites build the temple, the glory of the Lord fills it and is present in the temple. Well, in the garden, the Lord is present in the garden. When the temple is built in Israel, there are those who are designated to work it and to care for it. Adam and Eve are created to work it and to care for it.

So one of the themes of Scripture that biblical theologians have identified is that there is a presence of God that's established. It's established in the garden of Eden. It's mirrored in the temple with God's presence in 1 Kings 8. We know that Jesus is God incarnate and that through the Spirit who indwells His people, we are called God's temple. And so the garden of Eden begins this idea of living in relationship with God, in worshiping God in creation as we are created.

Of course, the final picture of humanity that we see in Genesis 2:25 is a beautiful picture of man and woman now coming together in a way that only man and woman can. What I'd like for you to remember about Genesis 2:25 is that this phrase, if you'll look at it with me, let's read 2:24–25, "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." Verse 25, "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." It's hard to believe that that language of naked and not ashamed has anything to do or is primarily related to sexuality. The idea here is very simple: everything they could possibly want and desire, they now have. They are completely and wholly engaged in enjoying the good creation that God has made for them.

Maybe use this metaphor. Let's say that you have small children, and you take your children to the playground. I have to use my grandchildren because I can't remember back far enough when my children were that age. So I take my grandchildren to the playground, and there's little Bradley and little Olivia and little Kate and little Annabel. And they're doing what a four-, three-, two-, and one-year-old would do in the playground. They're picking up gravel or little bits of wood. They're climbing; they're sliding; they're swinging. They are completely and wholly absorbed in the beauty and wonder of this place where we have brought them. They are aware of nothing other than the things they're touching; the things they're seeing; the things they're doing. They're fully and completely absorbed in everything—in the goodness and beauty and joy and delight that this playground brings.

But there's a predator circling just outside the fence. That's what Genesis 3:1 tells us. In the garden, completely and wholly satisfied, enjoying life to its ultimate with all that God has created, Adam and Eve are fully and wholly alive. But then Genesis 3:1 tells us there's a predator. Genesis 3:1 introduces the predator: "Now the serpent was more *crafty*," there's the word, "than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made." *Crafty*, by the way, is actually a positive term in the book of Proverbs. The idea has to do that you're able to assess your situation and act in a way that allows you to accomplish your goal. If your goal is evil, that's crafty in a negative sense. If your goal is noble, that's what the proverbs call shrewd. Isn't that interesting? And so this predator is able to assess the situation and act in a way that accomplishes his goal. What's his goal? The rebellion of humanity. We'll talk more about it next week, but I want to set up the tension.

Assume you've never read this narrative, and all of a sudden the predator is on the scene and he's interacting with Eve; and you know, having never read the story, that she is in danger. She doesn't know it, but you know it, because you're reading it as an outsider. The temptation comes, and it's very simple: God is keeping something from you. There's something better. What He's keeping from you would give you a life that's better than what you have. The Hebrew narrative is very terse. It goes this way: She saw, she took, she ate, she gave, he took, he ate, and it's done. All that God has created—those He created as His image—have now rebelled against Him. Remember what Genesis 2:17 says. "If you eat of it," that which Eve has eaten of, "if you eat of it, you will surely die." If you've never read this narrative before—she saw,

she took, she ate, she gave, he took, he ate—the tension in this narrative is, What's God going to do?