

## **In the Beginning...**

### **Genesis 1:1-2:3**

Today we're looking at the first passage in our series through the Old Testament focusing on God's promise to provide a King who would rule over His people in righteousness. To understand that story we need to start at the beginning, and so we will be looking at Genesis 1 and 2.

As we come to this text, I'd like to start off addressing what may be the elephant in the room, which is the use of this passage in the debates around evolution. More often than not, it seems that when I hear a Christian reference Genesis 1, it is in relation to these debates. Now, Genesis 1 can be used in that discussion, and as Christians it should be, but it's really important to recognize that was not the original nor the primary reason for which this chapter was written.

This is really an obvious reality, if we stop to think about it. After all, Genesis was written thousands of years before Charles Darwin was even born, much less posited his theory of evolution. In the ancient near east (the historical context of Genesis) the question wasn't, "Did a god create the world?", which everyone assumed, but rather, "What god or gods created the world, and how?" The creation narratives of the ancient world reflect a preoccupation with these questions.

Some of these accounts share similarities with the Genesis narrative, such as the Egyptian creation story in which one of the gods speaks 9 demi-gods into existence. Many other accounts include some conflict either amongst the gods, or between the gods, demi-gods, and man. Those accounts are often starkly and violently different than the Genesis story. For example, the Akkadian creation epic, Enuma Elish, features the demi-god Tiamat who tries to overthrow the gods but is ultimately defeated by Marduk, the champion of the gods, who then creates the cosmos out of Tiamat's corpse. It is to such accounts that Genesis 1 is so jarringly different. There is one God and there is

no obvious conflict. He is simply, peacefully, and even joyfully creating a good world for His good creations as a display of His intrinsic, holy goodness.

However, all of the various accounts of creation have massive implications on what it means to live in this world and to serve the God or gods who rule it. Worshipping a god who made the world out of the entrails of his vanquished enemy is bound to be different than worshipping a God who made the world as one plants a garden. Those are vastly different personality types.

So, this is what I hope to impress upon us all this morning: what the Genesis creation story reveals about the character of God, the original intent for the world He created, and what that all implies about how we ought to live in that world today. This was what I believe Genesis 1 and 2 were originally and primarily written to address.

Genesis 1:1 reads, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”*

We could probably spend our entire time this morning on this one verse, but I’ll restrict myself to just a few observations. First, the phrase “In the beginning...” What does a beginning tend to imply? An end, right? As simple as these first few words are, they are telling us that something meaningful is beginning, and it will one day come to a meaningful end. This could be a good or a bad end, but in either case it will be a meaningful end, and we must continue with the story to discover what that meaning is. So, right from the start, purpose is implied, which means one of the first questions we should have as we progress through what follows is: what is the purpose of this creation. For what happens at this beginning? God creates. The heavens and the earth, specifically.

Now we know the setting and the main character of the story: God. He is at the beginning, but He is not begun; He’s already there and acting. This is where we get the idea of God’s eternity: He was not created, He always was. He must be from *before* the beginning, if *at* the beginning He is already

working. And His work is the creation of all we know, summarized as “the heavens and the earth”. The author will explain *how* that creation happened, but first he sets the stage in verse 2.

*“The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”*

This verse has often been interpreted with an emphasis on God creating “ex nihilo”, creating something out of nothing, which, of course, is a logical necessity and also in view here, but originally the text had another emphasis as well, which was the creation of order out of chaos. The phrase “without form and void” can also be translated as “wild and waste”. The picture conjured is that of a wilderness wasteland. In Jewish thought, the wilderness was a place of unsurety and instability, where chaos and desolation reigned.

The second phrase “and darkness was over the face of the deep” strengthens the feeling of foreboding and confusion. It brings to mind another image, that of the sea at night. Can you imagine a more unstable, unsure, confusing environment than the sea in pitch darkness? The sea was another place of chaos in the Jewish imagination. But then there is hope: the Spirit of God is over it all.

In one sentence the picture goes from one of darkness and desolation to one of hope. This description of the Spirit gets at a third image, that of a mother bird hovering over her chicks, encouraging them to either hatch or take flight. Suddenly hope and expectation are introduced. That hope is realized as God brings order and life to the formless void, beginning in verses 3-5.

*“And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”*

God begins by bringing the opposite of dark out of the darkness, calling it light, and judging it good. These verses touch on three major biblical motifs: light and dark, Day and Night, and good and evil. God separates the light from the dark, implying that they are opposed to one another and do not associate. And it is after He recognizes the good of the light that He separates them, which implies that the darkness is not good. I think this has something to say about the nature of evil, which is that evil is not a thing created, properly speaking, but rather is the substance (or more accurately, anti-substance) of the formless void from which God made good things. Darkness is the *absence* of light and goodness, not the *presence* of something with true existence; it is anti-existence, so to speak. In other words, by creating light, God created opposing categories: light and the absence of light, which we call darkness.

Light and dark are then separated into the domains of Day and Night. This further defines the relationship of light and dark. Because now we have gradation. Light gives way to dark, and dark gives way to light in a cycle. Which is another profound comment on the world God is creating. These verses are the foundation of a dualistic view of the world in which light and dark, day and night, good and evil are in a constant and seemingly endless ebb and flow with one another. This ebb and flow is even present here in the repeated phrase “...and there was evening and there was morning...” Interestingly, it is evening that precedes morning, but that shouldn’t really surprise us since this parallels what we’ve already seen in the text. God came to the evening (the dark and formless void) and brought the morning (light) out of it. Now, while there is this ebb and flow, God does not seem particularly bothered by the continued influence of the void, for He knows how the story will end. Before we get to that, let’s continue with verses 6-8.

*“And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were*

*above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.”*

We have to continue using our imaginations to understand how God is bringing shape to cosmos. It started shapeless, empty, and dark. God corrected the latter by bringing light out of the darkness. Now, He starts to bring form to the formlessness. He creates a space between the waters of the deep. We would think of the upper waters as the sky, and the lower waters as the ocean and seas. God is bringing form to the world, which continues in verses 9-13.

*“And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

*And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.”*

Here God creates habitable land, setting boundaries to the waters under the expanse. Now we have the waters of chaos sequestered in the way we know them today. The final touch He adds to the new-formed domain of the dry land is plant life. Do you see how He is preparing a place for His coming creations? He is forming the formless in preparation for filling the void. This He begins to do in verses 14-19.

*“And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the*

*greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.”*

On this day God begins to fill the domains He created on days 1-3. On day one, He created the domain of light and, by consequence, the domain of dark, of day and of night, and now He fills those domains with the sun, moon, and stars. It is at this point that day and night as we know them come into being, as God also instigates the motions of those heavenly bodies that demarcate seasons, days, and years. Notice too how even in the time of darkness, the night, there is still the presence of light in the moon and stars, whereas there is no such presence of darkness mentioned for the day. Next, He fills the expanse and the lower waters in verses 20-23.

*“And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens.” So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.”*

Here God creates the first creatures in whom is the breath of life, filling the domains of the sky and seas that He formed on day 2. What had still to this point been void of life is “swarming” with living creatures. Finally, the undoing of the formless void, the chaotic waste is completed in verses 24-31.

*“And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their*

*kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

*Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*

*So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.*

*And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”*

God’s final work of creation is to fill up the dry land of day 3 with land-dwelling creatures and men and women made in His image. We’re going to come back and consider this section in more depth, but for now simply notice that man is clearly distinguished from the rest of creation. In some sense, all of creation is a reflection of God’s image, this is what it means to be “good”, but mankind is singled out from the rest of God’s works as uniquely in His image. Scholars have long debated what the image of God is in man, and the reality is that it is probably not restricted to one unique characteristic. But whatever else it may mean, I think it is clear that rule over God’s creation is a part of that

image, because it is the first thing God mentions after proposing to make man in His divine likeness, saying, “And let them have dominion...” This role of man as ruler, or in the context of this series we may say, king of creation is massively important, as we’ll consider in a few minutes. First though, there is one more day in the creation narrative to read about, in chapter 2.

*“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”*

This was the whole goal of those first six days of creation, to get to the rest of day 7. I said earlier that there was no *obvious* struggle in this story, but like many of the other creation narratives of the ancient near east there actually is a struggle going on in Genesis 1, but it is so utterly one-sided that it can easily go unnoticed. God came to the formless and chaotic, dark and lifeless void, and effortlessly and joyfully conquered it, forming, ordering, enlightening, and enlivening. So complete was His victory that by day seven all that was left to do was to rest and enjoy all He had made. And notice that, very notably, day seven has no evening. For six days darkness stubbornly asserted its influence (or probably more accurately, it was allowed to persist), but on day 7 it is nowhere to be found. This is the world God originally intended, and indeed, achieved, though we know it will shortly be disrupted, but we’ll get to that next week. For now, let’s consider the implications of what we’ve just seen.

As I said earlier, as a creation narrative, Genesis 1 and 2 have massive implications on what it means to serve God and live in the world He created, because they tell us so much about who He is and what His intent for the world is. So, what can we say about who He is from this account?



First, He is the only true God. There are other spiritual beings who to us are godlike, but the only one who can truly and fully claim the title of God is Yahweh. This means He is utterly in control. He may allow things to play out at times, as He did in allowing the evening to recur for the first six days. But in the end, what He intends will come to pass.

Second, He is a God of order, life, and delight. It does not necessarily appear so to our English sensibilities, but Genesis 1:1-2:3 is poetic. Some is explicitly poetic, as shown by the formatting of verse 27, for instance. But there are other less obvious poetic elements.

For instance, many have noted the parallels between days 1-3 and 4-6. On days 1-3 God creates domains, and on days 4-6 He fills them with appropriate bodies. The domains of light and dark are filled with the sun, stars, and moon, the domains of sky and sea are filled with birds and fish, and the domain of the dry land is filled with animals and humans.

Additionally, the number 7, the number of completeness, recurs multiple times. Of course, the seven days. But there are also 7 pronouncements of goodness. In the original Hebrew the word count plays on 7. Verse 1 has 7 words. Verse 2 has 14. And Genesis 2:2-3 ends the narrative with 3 lines of 7 words each for a total of 21. All of these poetic elements contribute to the sense, which even comes through in the English, that God is doing something beautiful and joyous as He orders and brings life from the void.

Third, we see that He is a generous God who serves others. What in all that God did He create in service to Himself (beyond the simple need to be His good Self)? Nothing. It was all done for His creation. He created domains uniquely fit for the creatures with which He then filled them, and, as chapter 2 will eventually flesh out, He wasn't stingy.

And what can we say about God's original intent for the world from this account? His intent was to create a world in which His creatures could thrive and enjoy Him and His abundant goodness, free from darkness, chaos, and

death. This is the picture day 7 paints: a world in perfect, blissful harmony with its Creator. And all of this is important to see, because we were made in the image of this God and were put in charge of that world, so we better know what God is like and how He wants His world to be if we hope to faithfully fulfill that commission.

Going back then, Genesis 1:26 reads, *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”* The text goes on to explain that this image is shared by men and women. And God instructs these men and women to “be fruitful and multiply”, because as non-omnipresent beings there will need to be a lot of us to exercise worldwide dominion. There’s so much that could be said about all of this, but I just want us to consider two facts: 1) God made man to rule over His creation, and 2) man was to do so as God’s image bearers.

It seems to me that very often we separate our identity as God’s image bearers from our commission to rule over the earth, which has terrible consequences. Anytime you divorce power and authority from virtue and goodness, bad things follow. Which is why it is so important that we understand our call to rule the earth as a call to do so in the image and likeness of God. And as we’ve just seen, He is a God of order, life, and delight who generously serves others for their blessing. So, this is our main idea from the passage: **In creation God joyfully ordered a world full of life by overcoming the formless void, and commissioned mankind to rule that world as His image bearers unto rest and blessing for all creation.**

Of course, as we will begin to see next week, mankind failed miserably at this commission, sowing chaos instead of order, death instead of life, sorrow instead of delight, and selfishly exploiting others for their own personal gain instead of serving others for their good. You see, long before Israel needed a

new and better king, the world did. Jesus stands at the center, not just of Israel's story, but of mankind's story. In this sermon series we are going to be looking at the King God promised would come and set things right in the world. Inevitably, this will mean we spend a lot of time looking at promises made to Israel. But I want us to see that this King who will ultimately come from Israel is more than just the King of Israel, He is the Ruler of the earth God intended man to be from the very beginning. Jesus is the perfect image bearer of God, "the exact imprint" of God's nature according to Hebrews 1, and as the one with "all authority in heaven and on earth" He is restoring order, life, and delight to the world, gradually bringing us to the eternal day of rest when evening is no more. And as those who are made in God's image and who are in Christ, we are doubly called to be a part of that redemptive, Kingdom work in the world today, until Christ brings it to completion. I want to end by seeing what that will look like. We began with the first page of the Bible, so let's end with the last. This is what that meaningful end I mentioned at the beginning will look like.

Revelation 22:1-5 reads, *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*

Pastor Grant told us last week that God's plan all along has been to provide a good place for His people, where they can dwell with Him. Well, this is the fulfillment of that plan that He began in Genesis 1 and 2. This is a picture of the eternal day 7 to come, in which chaos, death, and darkness are no more, and God's image-bearers dwell and reign with Him forever in His eternal light. And so, we say, "Come, Lord Jesus."