

## **Genesis 1:1–2:3 Revisited**

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We are continuing our study of the book of Genesis, taking a second look at the opening prologue. In our previous study we looked at this section as a whole, in order to try to understand exactly what it is that we are dealing with, and how it relates to the verses that follow immediately afterward.

We saw a number of ways that the prologue is distinct from the material beginning in Genesis 2:4: its amazing literary structuring around the concept of the number 7; its thematic structuring which creates a very balanced, almost poetic picture of the creation; and its very deliberate and systematic way of undermining the pagan pantheon of so-called gods, demonstrating the uniqueness and un-rivaled power and authority of the God of Israel.

Further, we saw that the words in Genesis 2:4 (“This is the account of the heavens and earth when they were created”) send a strong literary signal that a shift in style and form and intent takes place from that point forward, and that we are, therefore, to regard that which precedes 2:4 as something like a preface. The account is historical, to be sure, but it is not typical history. It does not follow the conventions of scientific, 21st-century history, but of ancient poetic, memorable, highly stylized, portable, catechetical history. It is a kind of “history to go” that would have served a very immediate and practical function for the people of Israel, who didn’t have pocket Old Testaments that they could consult as they stood poised on the edge of the Promised Land, needing very badly to be reminded of who God was, who they were, and who was running the show.

And so it is that the significance of this opening prologue is not to be found so much in the sequence of events or in the minute details of what happened and when, but rather in the overall message of the creation week as a whole: At the center of God’s purposeful, all-powerful, creative work are two people who are privileged to be, and commissioned to live, as images of God, filling the creation with others who bear God’s likeness and managing God’s creation on his behalf and for his glory.

Now, we’ll have a bit more to say about the relationship between the opening prologue and Genesis 2:4-17 in future studies, but at this point we will concentrate on fleshing out some of the more central truths that we are meant to

take away from our reading of these opening verses. In particular, we will focus on three things:

1. what this passage tells us about the creation;
2. what this passage tells us about the creator; and
3. what this passage tells us about human beings, the crown of that creative work.

## **The Creation**

The first thing we need to think about is what this passage tells us about the creation. For the sake of time and space, we will focus on only one aspect of this passage's teaching on creation.

Now, in thinking about what this passage tells us about the creation, we are dealing with a minor theme. It's minor because, while we can learn much about the creation from this account, what we learn is not central to the author's intent. Unfortunately, many treatments of Genesis over the years have acted as if its teaching about creation is the main theme and, as a result, have glossed over or ignored altogether other aspects of the passage that were decidedly more significant to the author. And so, while I do want to say something about this aspect of the passage, I do not want to give the impression that this is the most important part of it.

With that opening qualification then, the thing this passage makes clear about the creation is this: the universe did not create itself but was instead the deliberate, un-opposed work of a single, all-powerful, eternally existent creator.

Now, again, while these things are relevant to us, they would not have been terribly relevant to the people in Moses' day. There was not, back then, any debate about whether the universe was purposely created or randomly came into existence. In Moses' day, nobody doubted that the universe was a creation; they just didn't agree on whose creation it was. The question of a random universe, then, is a contemporary question. Accordingly, Genesis 1:1-2:3 was not written to refute the idea of randomness, or evolution, or anything like that. It might refute these things incidentally, but not programmatically.

The people who received this account originally — the people of God in the wilderness with Moses — would have valued these words for different reasons. You see, before the Hebrew people went charging into this occupied land to take by force what God had promised to them, they needed reassuring that the God who had sent them there was the God who is, and that it was part of that God's design and intention for them to do what they were about to do. Further, they needed to be reminded that the so-called "gods" of these nations they were about

to encounter were, in fact, nothing at all, and therefore that there was nothing to fear.

For God's people in our own day, the application is a little different. We are not perched on the edge of some Promised Land with a commission to go in and take it. Instead, we are the beneficiaries of the One who has already gained a greater blessing, of which Israel's Promised Land was merely a shadow and token. Christ, our King, Christ the Lord, Christ the True Son of God, the Israel of God, by his life and death and perfect obedience, earned the right to rule over the new heavens and new earth. Right now, he reigns in heaven, and when we die we will be with him, enjoying a much better life than Israel ever had in the Promised Land. And when Christ returns in glory, he will restore the earth, recreating it as a sinless paradise, and we will reign over this new earth with him.

And yet, even though Christ has already achieved assured access to the kingdom of heaven for his people, it is also true that this same Christ has commissioned his people here on earth to bring the good news of that kingdom into all the world. We are not to take it over, but to live in the midst of this God-denying and fallen world as subjects of the heavenly kingdom. And so, as we do these things, we find ourselves in the midst of people who are opposed to us, and to what we believe, and to what we teach. We find that our desire to advance the good news of the kingdom is met by the advance of opposing kingdoms and alternative beliefs about the world and its meaning.

And so, like the people of Israel, God's people today need the reassurance that this passage provides, admittedly with a slightly different emphasis. In Moses' day nobody doubted that the world was the product of a creator, but in our day the majority of those we meet doubt this greatly. Further, in the face of the assumptions of modern science, the question about the world and how it came to be continues to trouble God's people from time to time. In short, the issue in our culture is not "Which God created the universe?" but "Did any God create the universe?"

As I am driving around Baton Rouge in my car, wondering, amongst other things, if "traffic" is a consequence of the Fall, I usually listen to books on tape rather than to the radio. And one of the books I have listened to recently is *Don't Know Much About the Universe*, a book on astronomy and cosmology. And one of the things that gets talked about in that book is the origin of the universe, which according to one of the more popular theories, started out as a single point — a "singularity" — which was this sort of gravitational nightmare that was so strong it contained all the matter of the universe in a single point, which was so ridiculously small you wouldn't think it could contain all the stuff of the universe. And as the author talked about this singularity, it sounded like he was trying to suggest — without actually saying it — that it was really more of a nothing than a something.

And then, as the story went on, something happened to this nothing: the warranty ran out, and the singularity broke, and all of the sudden stuff was flying everywhere, and there was this expanding mass of heat and light and gak. And somehow amidst all of that stuff flying all about, after about 40 gazillion years, it managed to organize itself — all on its own, mind you — into butterflies and waterfalls and people staring up at the stars, going, “I wonder how we got here?”

And as I listened to this book I remembered a class I took once at LSU. It was an astronomy class. Foolishly, I thought we were actually going to look at stars in this class. But in reality, we spent an entire semester in a small, poorly lit classroom, exploring the mysteries of black holes. For weeks we talked about matters like the geometry of space and all the strange things gravity does, including curving space and bending light and generally making a mess of everything — especially Newtonian mechanics. We studied how funny things happen to time when you travel really fast, or spend too much time hanging around black holes. And we talked about matter and anti-matter and what-does-it-matter and black holes and white holes and wormholes. And it was all very fascinating. But at the end of the day, when you got behind the fancy language, what the professor was saying was this: everything came from nothing, or at least mostly nothing, and for no particular reason.

Over against that, the clear message of Genesis 1 is that things are going on here for a particular reason. It's not so much the issue of whether things suddenly came into existence. God obviously did this, so it is clearly possible. The issue, really, is whether this sort of thing could happen without the purposeful action and intervention of something or someone outside itself, namely God. The answer that comes from Genesis is “Don't be silly, the universe did not create itself, God created it. And further, he didn't just wind it up and let it go; he was intricately involved in the entire process. And, as Jesus said in John 5:17, God is still involved right up to this very moment.”

And so, again, one thing we learn about the creation is that it is the deliberate, unopposed work of a single, all-powerful, eternally existent creator. Now, of course, there are all sorts of other things we can learn about the creation from this passage — things we cannot develop here, but which are worth mentioning. For example, we also learn that the material world is *good* and even *very good*. Another thing we see is that creation exhibits *design* and *interdependence* and even *function*. In short, the creation itself is this mind-boggling masterpiece of unfathomable genius, which points beyond itself to the hand of an awesome, incomparable creator.

## The Creator

Besides teaching us something about creation, the prologue of Genesis also teaches us about our creator God. First, this passage teaches us about the generosity of God. Here he is, complete in himself, not lacking anything, in eternal and perfect fellowship with the Son and the Spirit. In his Trinity, God exists in perfect community. And yet, with unbelievable generosity and goodness, he determines to make a world. And what a world he has created! It is beautiful, abundant, teeming with life. And at the pinnacle of this created, magnificent world are these people to whom God gives this incredible privilege of bearing his image.

Besides God's generosity, the prologue also highlights the awesome power of God. Here we have a God who is not just working with pre-existing materials. He's not just moving things around and re-shaping them. No, we have here an eternally existent God who determined, merely by an act of his will, to speak into being things that previously were not.

Further, we see in these verses the wisdom of God. We see his wisdom in the thoroughness and completeness and perfection of his created world. We see it in the design and orderly arrangement of the universe, in the way that its various parts work together and coordinate with one another.

Finally, we see in these verses that at the end of all of God's working there is something called God's "rest." There is a rhythm to God's working, a pattern of work and rest. We see that God has a season of labor, and then that he ceases from that labor. Of course, the "rest" of God that we see here is not to be equated with inactivity, for even during his rest, he still sustains, preserves, and guides. So, when it says God "rested," it doesn't mean that he sat down in some sort of cosmic lounge chair. Rather, it means that he came to the end of this particular work of creation. He stopped and surveyed all that he had done, "stepping back" as it were, to enjoy it, to take delight in it.

And, of course, these truths about God — his power, his generosity, his wisdom, his own pattern of labor and rest — these things would have been significant for the people of Israel, standing as they did on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Because, you see, they stood there as the prime beneficiaries of God's power and wisdom and generosity, and as the inheritors and imitators of his pattern of work and rest.

This was the same God who had powerfully delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh. This was the same God whose wisdom had been repeatedly displayed to them and which could be seen so clearly in the laws and commandments given them through Moses. This was the same God whose generosity and goodness to them had been demonstrated over and over again, despite their grumbling and complaining and faithlessness and fear. This same God — not once but twice now

— had brought them through the wilderness of their sin to the doorstep of the Land he had promised to them through their forefather Abraham. And this same God, who himself modeled a rhythm of work and rest, had offered his people their own land as a place of rest. This was not ultimate rest, mind you, but it was still true Sabbath rest from their former labor as slaves in Egypt. As Hebrew 11 makes clear, God's people in the Old Testament understood that they were aliens and strangers on earth, and that they would always be so.

Further, God's people understood that as awesome as any place they might receive here could be, there was still a better place that awaited them, "a heavenly country" as the writer of Hebrews says, that would be their the final and ultimate place of rest. And so, for God's people in the desert, this account would have confirmed some deeply significant truths about the God they served, about his power and wisdom and generosity and desire that they experience his rest both now and later.

And those same truths about God that were so crucial for his people in Moses' day are still vitally true for God's people today. And they are seen even more clearly through the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Paul so clearly points out, Christ is the perfect image and likeness of the invisible God:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:15-17).

When Paul said that Christ is the image of the invisible God, he meant, among other things, that Christ is the image of God in a way that mere creatures could never be. Our imaging of God is an approximation; Christ's image is perfect, exact, since in him the fullness of God dwells (Col. 2:9). And so it is that the same truths about God that we see in Genesis are mirrored in his Son Jesus Christ.

As God exhibited his great power in his ability to create something from nothing, to make things happen by speaking them into existence, Christ also showed, in numerous ways, that the same power resided within his spoken word. He spoke and people were amazed, sicknesses vanished, storms were silenced, and the dead came back to life. Further, as God's wisdom was displayed in creation (Rom. 1), Christ is the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

Even further, as the creation displayed the generosity and goodness of God, so Christ became the very definition of generosity itself, giving up his heavenly throne to take on human flesh, to live under the very law he created, to give up his own life for the benefit of all his people. And we see the ongoing generosity of Christ who gave and continues to give good gifts to his church (Eph. 4). By his

Spirit's work, Christ is bringing to full restoration the marred image of God within his creatures, mirroring one of the very first acts of generosity that came from the hand of creator. And today, this Christ, who is the exact image of our creator God, offers himself to us, along with all the blessings he possesses, as that very same Sabbath rest initiated by the Father at the very beginning (Heb. 3:7-4:13).

In short, God's rest, whereby he ceased his work to enjoy and delight in his good creation, was offered in partial and token form to the people of Israel under Moses, specifically in the form of the Promised Land. And what was their response? Well, initially, it was to harden their hearts. And as a result of their unbelief, the first generation of Israelites missed out on the rest that God offered them in the Promised Land.

But, as the writer of Hebrews points out, that offer of rest was not just limited to the people in Moses' day. He demonstrates this by quoting from Psalm 95, which was written long after the time of Moses, in the days of King David. As you read that psalm, you see that the same promise of "rest" that people received under Moses was still offered in the days of David and Solomon. And that same rest, says the writer of Hebrews, was still available to the people in his own day, as it is in every age, because it is a "rest" that was foreshadowed by the Promised Land but which is found in all its fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so the writer of Hebrews warned his readers not to miss out on the "rest" that comes through Jesus by having unbelieving hearts like the people in the wilderness. And we would echo that same warning this morning. The rest that God himself experienced at creation, which he offered and still offers to his people, is still offered today.

This is why on the seventh day there was no statement "and there was morning and evening." The fact is, God is still in the midst of that rest; it is an ongoing rest and an ongoing offer of rest that has not been withdrawn, and which is still offered in Jesus Christ. And until that offer is withdrawn, that seventh day remains "open." All those who place their faith and trust in him enter into that rest — now, in this life — and experience a foretaste of the final rest in the new earth.

This is one reason why the Sabbath pattern of work and rest remains so important for God's people. It perpetually reminds us that we live in a world that does not belong to us, but which is the possession of our creator, who has generously shared all good things with us and invited us to enjoy him and to experience the rest that only he can give. And so, getting up every week and shuffling off to church is about much more than just drinking cups of coffee and saying a few prayers and sharing some stories and hearing a Bible lesson. It's an identity check. It's about remembering who you are and who you aren't, and acknowledging (by your identification with this pattern) the greatness and deserved honor of the creator God.

## Human Beings

The third and final thing I want you to see in this very cursory look at the Genesis prologue is what it tells us about human beings, who are the crown of God's creation: we were created in the image of God. Now, there are various ways of understanding and describing exactly what this image of God within humankind really is. Basically, the various descriptions of this image can be categorized in two different ways: as a quality; and as function, ability or responsibility.

In terms of qualities or characteristics, the image of God includes such things as: self-consciousness and sentience; morality; original righteousness and holiness; volition; and spirituality. All of those are legitimate ways of understanding what it means to be in the image of God.

However, in terms of the passage itself, it seems that we are primarily meant to think about "image" in terms of functions or abilities. In this regard, the image of God is seen in the fact that the man and woman were given a two-fold commission to: 1) be fruitful and multiply; and 2) to subdue the earth and have dominion over it, in other words, to manage God's creation on his behalf.

Now, as one writer has pointed out, it is helpful to understand something about the ancient world to make better sense of these things. After all, one could rightly ask, "What do being fruitful and multiplying and managing God's creation have to do with the image of God?" In response to that question, one scholar has written this:

Many kingdoms in the ancient Near East stretched across thousands of square miles. The kings of these empires were powerful leaders, but the size of their domains presented serious political problems. How could kings exercise control over their empires? How could they keep order? Ancient kings simply could not maintain personal contact with all regions of their nations. They needed other ways to establish their authority.

Many rulers solved this problem by erecting images of themselves at key sites throughout their kingdoms. They produced numerous statues of themselves and endowed their images with representative authority... As we gaze upon the remains of these imposing figures their ancient purpose becomes evident. When citizens saw the images of their emperor, they understood to whom they owed their allegiance. They knew for certain who ruled the land. [We saw a contemporary version of this in Iraq with the statues of Hussein that were placed around the country, and which were torn down when he fell from power. J.S.L.]

Moses described the twofold job of humanity against this historical background. To be sure, God did not [have to do things this way] ... but he chose to establish his authority on earth in ways that human beings could understand. Just as emperors filled their kingdoms with statues of themselves, so God commanded his images to populate the earth. In essence, God says, "Multiply yourselves ... I want my images spread to the ends of the world." Just as emperors conferred authority on their images, God commanded his likenesses to reign over the earth. "Subdue and rule", God commanded. "I give you authority to represent me in my world."<sup>1</sup>

And so these words, coming to the people of God in Moses' day, would have been both encouraging and challenging. God, through Moses, wanted his people to hear this account and to know that they were to enter into the Promised Land with this two-fold commission ringing in their ears. They were to see their entry into that place as part of the fulfillment of that commission: multiply and spreading God's images across the face of the earth, and exercising dominion over God's creation, within the land promised to them.

As we move from the Old Testament into the New Testament, we see that the image of God, which was given to the man and woman and then disfigured in the fall of man (Gen. 3), has been perfectly restored and completed in Christ, who is fully God and fully man and who is the image of God *par excellence*. He was perfect humanity, the ideal image and, as a result, the image to which we will one day be fully restored. For when we are fully conformed to Christ's image, we will be simultaneously restored as the image of God, since to do one is to accomplish the other.

So Christ, in his perfect humanity as the perfect image bearer of God, fulfilled the creation mandate to multiply God's images. He did this first through his own direct ministry and work of redemption, making us adopted sons and daughters of God. And he continues to fulfill the mandate indirectly through the ministry of his disciples — through you and me as we receive his commission and carry the gospel forward, partnering with him in this venture. Do you see this? Every time someone responds to the gospel, God's image is fruitfully multiplied.

Christ also fulfills the mandate to exercise dominion and manage God's creation. He has conquered sin and death; he has subdued the serpent. In short, he has done what needed to be done to achieve the reconciliation of all things and to restore both his fallen creatures and his cursed creation to their rightful state. He has done this directly and is still working this out indirectly, again, through his disciples and followers, through whom the serpent is still being crushed in the preaching of the gospel, and through whom his dominion is being advanced. This

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<sup>1</sup> Pratt, Richard L., Jr. *Designed for Dignity* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1993).

advance takes place inwardly in human hearts through the grace of sanctification. It also takes place outwardly through our lives, which have been transformed and are still being transformed, and through the impact of our lives on the watching world.

As you and I respond to the gospel, apply the gospel, show the gospel, and spread the gospel, Christ continues to fulfill that creation mandate through us. His image is multiplied and restored, and his kingdom is daily advanced, to the praise and glory of God. Amen.