

# The Beginning... and What Went Wrong

SESSION

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*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

—Genesis 1:1-2

## INTRODUCTION

The foundational story in all of the Old Testament is found in these opening chapters of Genesis. The purpose of this story is two-fold: (1) It establishes Yahweh, the God of Israel, as the God by whose word all things exist, and (2) it recounts the disobedience of the first humans—the crown of creation—and the aftereffects of their disobedience. Although the specific events of Genesis 1–3 are not mentioned again in the Old Testament, the elements of this foundational story form the central drama that undergirds not only the Old Testament but the Bible as a whole.

## DAILY ASSIGNMENTS

The passages for this week are drawn from the opening chapters of Genesis and Psalm 19. The general outline of some of these passages is likely very familiar to you. If that is the case, try to read these passages as if you were seeing them for the first time. Or perhaps read them out loud, imagining that you are explaining these passages to someone who is completely new to the Bible. Read at a pace that allows you to see what you may not have noticed before.

### **DAY ONE: Genesis 1:1–2:3**

This is perhaps one of the most familiar passages in the Bible. Pay particular attention to: (1) how the six days are structured (days 1–3 provide the “form” and days 4–6 fill the “void”; see 1:2); (2) the role of humanity in the Creation order; and (3) the culmination of Creation in God’s rest (sabbath). Consider how the Genesis story might have been understood by the early Israelites.

### **DAY TWO: Psalm 19**

Psalm 19 is a psalm of David and is one of a number of psalms that praise God for creation. Notice how David personifies creation as having a “voice.” Also take note of the second half of the psalm, beginning with verse 7. Why does David move from a psalm in praise of creation to one in praise of the Law? What connection is David drawing between creation and Law?

### **DAY THREE: Genesis 2:4-25**

In this passage, we move from a focus in Genesis 1 on creation in general to a focus in Genesis 2 on the creation of humanity in particular. As with 1:1–2:3, this is a very familiar passage and one that continues to attract the attention of readers and scholars of every age. As you read it, reflect on what you think the writer is saying about the purpose of this portion of the story.

### **DAY FOUR: Genesis 3**

As far back as the third chapter of Genesis, we come to the pivotal point on which the remaining biblical story turns. It is hardly an overstatement to say that the remaining biblical drama is a response to the events described in this section. As you read, keep these questions in mind: (1) What is the nature of the offense committed by Adam and Eve, and (2) what are the consequences?

### **DAY FIVE: Genesis 4–5**

The story of Cain and Abel follows closely upon the story of Adam and Eve in Chapter 3. What connection is being established or suggested between them? Cain's offense is murder, obviously, but what other interpersonal issues are there between him and his brother Abel? In Chapter 5, we encounter the first of several important genealogies in Genesis. What role does this genealogy play in the narrative?

### **DAY SIX: Commentary**

Read the commentary in the participant book.

## CREATION AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

What are these opening chapters of Genesis trying to say? More importantly, what are these chapters trying to say about who God is and how we as God's people are to respond?

This question of "Genesis and us" is certainly important on our spiritual journey, but it is not the first stop on that journey. The first task before us is to do the best we can—using whatever tools are available to us—to understand what Genesis meant to the ancient Israelite audience. (And this is true not only here but anytime we read the Bible.) After all, the Bible is not only God's Word to us but God's Word to those who first heard it. The first question to ask then is, What did it say to them? After we try to come to grips with that question, we will be in a much better position to ask what that ancient message says to us.

So how did the Israelites hear Genesis 1? How did these words connect to their world? It is sometimes tempting to read Genesis 1 and ask modern questions. For example, how does the Creation story in Genesis conform to our present scientific knowledge? Of course, a question such as this is not in and of itself out of bounds, and to a certain degree, it may be unavoidable. But we must remember that ancient Israelites did not ask of those stories the kinds of questions we often ask. Genesis 1 was not written to answer *our* questions but to address *Israel's* questions.

Beginning about the middle of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, archaeologists discovered a number of creation stories from different peoples of the ancient Near East that help put the biblical account in context. These accounts tell stories of creation where a number of gods are responsible. In one prominent example from ancient Babylon, creation was the result of a bloody conflict among the gods. Genesis 1 shares some of the descriptions of one or more of these other accounts (for example, light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars; see Genesis 1:3, 14).

Where Genesis 1 stands out is in its insistence that Israel's God alone created the world through God's spoken word. The purpose of such a declaration is not to answer specific contemporary intellectual curiosities about the nature of matter or the first moments of the universe's existence. It was written to declare to the Israelites that their God was responsible for everything that existed and that God was the one, therefore, who was worthy of their worship. Genesis 1 is not an intellectual exercise but a deeply religious one. The Israelites lived in a world where every surrounding nation had a plurality

of gods (pantheon). The Israelites were different. They had one God, and this is the message that rings loud and clear from Genesis 1.

## THE CREATOR IS TO BE WORSHIPED

To say that Yahweh, Israel's God, is alone the Creator is not an abstract theological statement; it is a call to worship. This is why, for example, a number of psalms burst out in praise of Yahweh the Creator. One example is Psalm 19. God's glory is so great and so apparent, even creation itself is said to speak of it. The psalm uses specific Genesis language: the "heavens" and the "firmament" proclaim what God has done. These words are found in Genesis 1:1 and 1:6-8. (In the NRSV, the word *dome* is used in Genesis 1:6-8 instead of *firmament*, as in Psalm 19. But the Hebrew word in Genesis 1 and Psalm 19 are the same, *raqiy'a*.)

Even though the heavens and the firmament have no powers of speech, as the psalm tells us (19:3-4), nevertheless they are still "heard" throughout the world because of the awesomeness of the sun's circuit (19:5-6). The message is, If you want to see God's glory, look up.

But the psalm does not end there. David is not simply interested in a contemplative posture for his people. Six verses about creation are followed, somewhat abruptly, by eight verses about the Law! Clearly a connection between them is being established, and that connection seems to be fairly straightforward: Knowing God as Creator should have an effect on how you behave. The God who created the heavens is also the God who gave you the Law, David seems to be saying. And as worthy as God is of praise for the creation (even the heavens and firmament join in), so too is the Law. It is to be desired more than gold or sweet honey (19:10). Knowing God as Creator has very practical implications.

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## WHAT WENT WRONG

Two of the best-known stories in the Old Testament are Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and Cain and Abel in Chapter 4. The significance of these early

chapters has been mined over and over again by Jewish and Christian readers for many hundreds of years. The images of the serpent, the forbidden fruit, fig leaves, and brother against brother are woven into the fabric of our popular culture.

Though merely two chapters, this section is crucial to our understanding of the entire drama of the Bible. The direction these chapters take determines subsequent human history and is reflected in the very content of the rest of Scriptures. And this turn of events will not find their resolution until, as the apostle Paul says, Christ's act of obedience on the cross makes right Adam's disobedience (Romans 5:12-21, especially verse 19; see also 1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

There is much that could be discussed here, but perhaps what should be highlighted most is the fact that the disobedience of the first humans led quickly to a downward spiral (that is, Cain's jealousy and the murder of Abel). A lot of questions may swirl in our heads, and some are not easy to answer. (Examples: What is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Why is an offering from the fruit of the ground less acceptable than a firstling of the flock?) But if we pare things down and pay attention to the way these events are described, it remains basically an account of God's command, human disobedience, and the consequences of that disobedience.

Disobedience is part of the biblical message, and it must also be a self-conscious element in how we view both our own place in that drama and the evil we see in the world. To do so will also lead to a much more profound understanding of the steps that God took to remedy the situation—glimpses and forerunners are found in the Old Testament, with the final act found in the death and resurrection of Christ.

## THE CREATOR IS THE SAVIOR

Here we turn to a topic we will have a chance to look at a bit more in subsequent lessons, but it is such an important biblical concept that we should pause for a moment now and take it in. As we see in Psalm 19, to speak of God as Creator is not just an abstract, philosophical statement; rather, it is a confession to be found on the lips of God's people to move them to godly living. There is another important connection forged in the Old Testament concerning God as Creator: The God who created the universe is also the God who saves his people. This is a theme we find again and again on the pages of Israel's story.

To put it another way, the point of the Creation story is not simply to establish that God is great. It certainly does that, but there is more to it. And it is more than an argument that Israel's God is to be worshiped, not the gods of the nations, although as we have seen, that is certainly an important aspect of the Creation story as well. It is also a message to the Israelites: "This great God is *your* God. And God is not just great 'back then.' God is great *right now*, in your circumstances, where you need deliverance. The God who created the heavens and earth, the sun, moon, and stars, all animals and people—this is the very same God who is very near you and who will save you."

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This idea that the Creator God is also the Savior God is seen most clearly in the Old Testament in passages that speak of the Exodus and the release from Babylonian captivity. But even in Genesis, this theme is seen in God's plan for making right the disobedience of Genesis 3. It is a series of new beginnings: For example, Abraham is a new start for God's people. God chooses him to be the one through whom the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:2-3). He is a new Adam, so to speak, the person from whom all of God's people will descend, first the Israelites and then, as Paul said, all those who are united to God through faith in God's Son (Galatians 3:15-29). God's way of saving his people is by providing a new beginning.

The opening chapters of Genesis are there for a reason—not simply to talk about what God did but to underline in no uncertain terms who God is. These chapters set all of Scripture on a trajectory, the force of which is felt throughout the biblical drama of what God is willing to do to maintain a covenant relationship with the people called Israel.

## INVITATION TO DISCIPLESHIP

Genesis 1–5 is not just an introduction to the Bible in the sense that those texts ease us, so to speak, into the good stuff that follows. Rather, these opening passages jar us into the mindset that the God of all creation is awesome, that God has called out and set apart a special people, and that God is concerned for them despite the plight of human sin. Can we try to grasp this very radical and wonderful message? Can we put ourselves in the place of ancient Israelites, even though we read Genesis with modern eyes?

As twenty-first-century readers, we understand—and even take for granted—so much about the complexity of creation that the early Israelites could not have even imagined. That fact in itself should inspire in us a sense of wonder and worship. We know not only that God created the stars; we also know something of the vastness of the universe. We speak in terms of whole galaxies measured in terms of light years and separated from each other by millions of light years. Like the ancient Israelites, we say to the world around us, “We worship the true God, the one who made all this.”

At the same time, these opening chapters in Genesis also speak of disobedience and rebellion toward the God who not only created all things but who set apart human beings as the crown of creation. Genesis speaks of two extremes: the glorious acts of God and the destructive acts of humanity. Both are a part of the message of Genesis.

## FOR REFLECTION

- In what ways have we become desensitized towards the wonder of the universe that God has created? How have technology and living in a twenty-first-century world affected how we think of God?
- In Genesis 1, God speaks truth in language that people of the time would have understood. What might this tell us about the way God speaks to us today?
- How are we disobedient to God, not just in the big and obvious ways but in subtle ways? Are we aware how much jealousy affects the way we act towards others (as with Cain)?
- Read John 1 and note how it begins in a way similar to Genesis 1. How does reading John 1 affect how you read Genesis 1? How does reading both Scriptures together deepen or expand your appreciation for God's plan?

## FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Our first parents fell into open disobedience because already they were secretly corrupted; for the evil act had never been done had not an evil will preceded it. And what is the origin of our evil will but pride? For “pride is the beginning of sin.” And what is pride but the craving for undue exaltation? And this is undue exaltation, when the soul abandons Him to whom it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes a kind of end to itself. This happens when it becomes its own satisfaction.... If the will had remained steadfast in the love of that higher and changeless good by which it was illuminated to intelligence and kindled into love, it would not have turned away to find satisfaction in itself and so become frigid and benighted; the woman would not have believed the serpent spoke the truth, nor would the man have preferred the request of his wife to the command of God.

Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.13, translated by Marcus Dods in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 18, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Editor in Chief (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.: Chicago), 1952, p. 387. The sentence in quotations comes from Sirach 10:13, one of the books of the Apocrypha.