

The Drama of Scripture

Creation (Part 2)



Last week we began a sermon series on the Drama of Scripture. We're taking two weeks on each of the four acts of this drama: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. We are seeking to understand the plot line of the Bible so that we can understand Scripture better, get to know God better, and find our place in the biblical story.

Today's message is part 2 of our discussion of Creation, the first "act" in the drama of Scripture. Last week we saw from Genesis 1 that 1) God is the Creator of everyone and

everything, 2) that God pronounced His creation "very good," and 3) that humanity (male and female) are the crown of God's good creation. If you weren't here last week, I'd encourage you to watch or listen to the message on our web site. Today we are going to consider Genesis 2 and add to our understanding of creation.

Genesis 2 complements the creation account in Genesis 1. Genesis 2 expands on the creation of the man and woman. We'll notice three prominent details of this chapter. As we consider each of these, I will draw out some of the implications for us in our day.

God's assignment to the man: "cultivate and keep" the Garden. (Genesis 2:4-15)

In verse 4 we have the first mention of the personal name for God, YHWH (usually translated "Lord"). The God who created the heavens and earth was the God of Israel!

4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven. 5 Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. 6 But a mist used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground.

Verse 7 gives a brief account of the creation of the man:

7 Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

The term translated "formed" was commonly used of a potter who begins with clay and forms it into pottery. Here God is depicted as a potter, forming/fashioning the man out of the dust. Later biblical writers will employ this imagery to communicate God's absolute authority over Israel and all humanity. In Isaiah 64:8, for example, Isaiah will say, "But now, O LORD, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand." (see also Romans 9:20-21.)

Beginning in verse 8 we have a description of the Garden of Eden (which means “delight”).

8 The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

God was providing everything Adam would need. The author points out two specific trees which will be mentioned throughout chapters 2 and 3: **the tree of life** “in the midst of the garden” and **the tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. The nature of these two trees will unfold as we work our way through the text (2:16-17, 3:17, 22-24).

As one commentator pointed out, the “Garden of Eden” is more like a national park than a backyard garden. In addition to a great variety of trees, it contains four rivers and mineral deposits.

10 Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers. 11 The name of the first is Pishon; it flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 The gold of that land is good; the bdellium and the onyx stone are there. 13 The name of the second river is Gihon; it flows around the whole land of Cush. 14 The name of the third river is Tigris; it flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

Significantly, in verse 15 we read about the assignment God gave “the man.”

15 Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.

It’s significant to observe that Adam was given meaningful “work” even before the fall. God’s design was not for the man to be idle and unproductive. Work is not a curse; work is an expression of being made in the image of God. The creation account in Genesis 1 depicted God working for six days, bringing creation from being “formless and void” to being “very good.” Being made in God’s image, we continue to bring order to the created world. The 4th commandment in Exodus 20:8-11 not only commanded Israel to rest on the 7th day; it included a command to work for 6 days. In this way they were to imitate God who **worked** six days and rested on the seventh.

The first man’s work primarily involved agriculture. He was put in the garden of Eden, first, to **cultivate it**. Moses uses a word that can be translated serve, cultivate, work, or even worship. The description of the garden of Eden is probably meant to foreshadow worship in the tabernacle/temple. But the most immediate meaning is that of cultivating the garden. Adam was to take the raw materials of the garden and improve it, making it even more beautiful and productive.

Isn't it interesting that in its pristine condition, the garden still needed to be cultivated/ worked? Even though God's creation was "very good" there was a role for the man to develop and "improve" it. In fellowship with God, this would be a delightful work. The man could use his God-given creativity and imagination for agriculture, landscaping, artistic expression, etc. This is a foundational verse that establishes the goodness of "work."

Second, he was to keep or guard the garden so that it was safe. As we'll see next week, there was an adversary in the garden, a very real threat to God's purposes for creation.

We'll explore the theology of work more fully in a sermon series after the first of the new year. And we'll see next week that work is dramatically affected by the fall; work now includes frustration and toil/sweat. But that doesn't mean that work is part of the curse. Significantly, when Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden, they are told to "cultivate" the land, suggesting that this basic assignment still remains.

Since "work" is the main thing we do each week, whether or not we get paid for doing it, we need to understand how our work fits into the biblical story. As image bearers, our work is meant to be an expression of the image of God.

I don't know if you heard the news account of Geoffrey Owens, the man who played Elvin on the Cosby Show years ago. A few weeks back someone recognized him working at a Trader Joe's in New Jersey, posted a photo of him on social media, and commented on the fact that he used to be an actor and now he's working at a grocery store. Her comments were perceived as "job shaming," and lots of people spoke up and said that actors often have to work other jobs. I was especially struck by Geoffrey Owens' own comments about the whole incident. What he said reflects a very biblical attitude toward work:

[I hope that this experience will reshape] "what it means to work, the honor of the working person, [and] the dignity of work." "I hope . . . for a reevaluation of what it means to work and the idea that some jobs are better than others — that's actually not true," he said. "There is no job that's better than another job. It might pay better, it might have better benefits, it might look better on a resume. . . But actually, it's not better. Every job is worthwhile and valuable."

I have no idea if he's a follower of Christ or not, but Geoffrey Owens "gets" the spiritual reality that all work has dignity. Work is not a necessary evil; it's not the case that idleness is more fulfilling than working. Whether your work is raising your kids, working with your hands, doing intellectual work, volunteering in various ways, or creating something beautiful, your work is meant to be an expression of being created in the image of God.

God's command to the man: do not eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (Genesis 2:16-17) In verse 16 we read that God gave Adam a very specific commandment. As Creator, He had the right to do this. If we're going to "find our place

in the biblical story” we have to accept that as the Creator, God had every right to give a command such as the one found in verses 16 and 17:

16 The Lord God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; 17 but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”

I like Craig Barnes’ comment (*The Pastor as Minor Poet*, p. 32) on this verse: “We were created hungry, and the whole world was our food (except for one tree).” Adam could eat from all the trees that were “good for food” (v. 9), even from the “tree of life” (v. 9). The only tree from which he **couldn’t** eat was “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

Chapter 3 will explain that when you eat from this tree, your eyes are opened, and you gain a type of knowledge that humans cannot handle. You no longer take God’s word for what is “good and evil”; you begin to make your own ethical determinations of good and evil.

Note the penalty for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” This is the very statement that the serpent will challenge: “You surely will **not** die” (Genesis 3:1-7). The temptation for Eve was to disobey God’s command and to reject God’s designation of what’s good and what’s not. Next week we’ll talk about the nature of the “death” that took place when they disobeyed.

This verse flags a critical issue for you and me if we want to find ourselves in the biblical story and participate with God in this world. We need to **believe and accept that God has every right to give commands and to put limitations on us**. And we need to get to the place where we believe in the deepest part of our souls that His commands and limitations are good. Just as His creation was pronounced good (and very good), His commands are good in the deepest possible sense.

In the Garden of Eden, the first couple needed only one command. After the fall, which we’ll discuss the next two weeks, sin affected everyone and everything. God’s commands multiplied **for our good and for God’s glory**. If you read the Ten Commandments, for example, you will see a way of life that promotes *shalom*/wholeness: honoring our Creator; not dishonoring other people (created in God’s image) through stealing, lying, coveting, adultery; imitating God by remembering to rest one day a week.

As you think about your life and circumstances, what commands are the hardest for you to obey? Which commands limit you in ways that seem unreasonable or even wrong? The goal isn’t to grit our teeth and obey such commands even though we’d really rather disobey. The goal is to get to the place where we love God’s commands and we joyfully accept the limitations of those commands, knowing that they are good for us. This way of thinking flows from the realization that our Creator knows better than we do what is best.

God provided “a helper suitable” for the man. (*Genesis 2:18-25*) These verses complement the account in Genesis 1 of God creating humanity “male and female.” These verses go back and explain more of the relationship between the man and the woman.

After God pronounced seven times in chapter 1 that His creation is “good” or “very good,” it’s somewhat shocking to read that God pronounces something “not good,” namely Adam’s aloneness.

18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.”

In the Bible, a “helper” isn’t an assistant you get to do the things you don’t *want* to do. In the Scriptures a helper is someone who does for you what you *cannot* do for yourself. This become clear in passages such as Psalm 54:4 in which David declares, “God is my helper; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul.” You only need a helper if you have deficiencies. Adam had no suitable helper, no one who could satisfy his aloneness and who could address his deficiencies and help him do what God has called him to do. Specifically, this will involve 1) “ruling over” creation (cultivating and keeping it), and 2) being fruitful and multiplying [something he’d be hard pressed to do on his own]. He needed a “helper” who would encourage and enable faithfulness in this calling.

19 Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. 22 The Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

Notice the man’s reaction and the emphasis on how much like him she is.

23 The man said, “This is now bone of my bones, And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.”

“Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” reiterates the woman’s likeness to the man in contrast to all the animals he’d been naming.

24 For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Many generations later Moses sees the experience of the first couple as a paradigm for marriage. Since his wife is God’s provision for his deficiencies, that man shall leave his parents and form a new union with his wife. This act of becoming “one flesh” is very holistic, including emotional and sexual intimacy.

Note Moses' final comment:

25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

They had no shame even though they were unclothed; they had no reason to feel inadequate and no reason to hide. We will see in chapter 3 how Adam and Eve sinned and immediately experienced shame, realized they were naked, covered themselves, and hid.

These verses establish the foundational relationship between the man and the woman: they were created out of the same material; though different, they are essential alike, equally created in the image of God; in marriage they leave parents to form a new family unit. Unless we understand God's creation design for men and women, we won't understand our place in the biblical story, especially as it relates to human sexuality and marriage. As you know, many other stories are being told about marriage and sexuality. If we don't understand and believe the biblical story, we will gravitate toward one of these other stories or we will attempt to piece together several stories to try to make sense of our lives (which never works).

A couple weeks ago I reached out to Bob Cochran who was part of this church for many years before we sent him and his family to Indonesia to serve with Wycliffe. One of the things Bob and Susan have been involved in is "oral storying" - finding understandable and memorable ways to tell the very stories of the Bible to people who don't yet have a written language. They have seen first-hand the power of people seeing how they fit into the story of the Bible (in contrast to the stories they had been told in their cultures). I want to read a portion of what Bob shared with me as an example of how knowing this first act of the drama of Scripture can be revolutionary. Bob wrote:

It has been common among Papuan groups for women to be viewed as something wholly other than men. In extreme cases, it has been questioned whether women are even human. In other cases, women are assumed to have come from some less noble creative process (for example, I remember one Sawi man telling us that they believe women to have been created from the tail of a dog). The end result is that women in Papua have frequently been viewed as being different from men, somehow or other less valuable, less worthy, not quite up to snuff on the human scale. As a result, men in many Papuan groups have historically related with women much as they would a piece of property. They've also felt free and justified to use physical violence to punish, cajole or enforce their will.

As a result, we were really struck by the spontaneous response the first time we presented the creation account in story form to the Meyah people. We had come to the village of Wasegi expecting maybe 25-30 people but ended up with over 200 folks jammed into a little church building. People squeezed together on the floor, children wriggled in their parent's arms and faces lined the doorway in back, straining to hear.

After hearing the creation account, they discussed among themselves in small groups what they'd learned about God, themselves as humans, as well as how this word should be applied in their lives. As different ones stood up and shared what their group had discussed, various men who were leaders in the community began to stand and earnestly challenge those present that the Meyah women really deserved to be treated differently than they had in the past. They noted that the story told how both man and woman were created in God's image...equally valuable...equally wonderful...equally of divine origin. Accordingly, they continued, men really need to begin treating their wives differently...they should treat them with love, honor and respect. At that note, the whole building erupted into spontaneous applause. Wow! That's a Copernican revolution for a people group who have had a history of women being bought and sold like property via payment of a "bride price".

That's an illustration of the power of understanding the drama of Scripture, specifically the "first act" of creation. Genesis 2 tells us that a commitment to God's creation design can bring wholeness to our work, to the issue of obedience, and to relationships between men and women. Next week we begin considering the fall. If you're able, read Genesis 3 this week.