

God's world – Session 1

First Days

Remember the last time you read a terrific book, the sort that you can't put down, or saw a great movie, that kept you on the edge of your seat? It's always the beginning that gets you in – a mysterious crime, a wonderful romance, a quirky character. Beginnings (and endings) are almost always the most important parts, whether it be of stories, relationships or plans. Beginnings set the scene and determine the direction, and endings bring those beginnings to a satisfactory completion. The middle may often be the most exciting, but it is the beginning and the end that are the most crucial.

It's just like that with the Bible and the Bible's story. The beginning, those First Days of creation, establishes the foundation upon which everything else depends. It is here that the pattern of the Biblical narrative is set, and it is the beginning that points towards the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes.

In the First Days, we are introduced to the three main characters in the drama – God, the world, and that special part of the world that is somehow 'like' God, humanity. Foundational things about them are set in place. In the First Days, we see God's purposes set out for his world and for humanity, the path and pattern for their inter-relationships, their respective value and dignity. And at the same time, in these First Days, we catch a glimpse not only of how things were and were meant to be, but how in the grace and faithfulness of the Creator God, things will eventually become.

In the beginning ...

The beginning of the Bible is also the beginning of the story, and so it is to the opening chapters of the book of Genesis that we rightly turn to understand the First Days.

Read Genesis 1.1-2.25.

Gen. 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 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. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." 7 So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters

that were above the dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. 11 Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. 12 The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. 13 And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. 16 God made the two great lights — the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night — and the stars. 17 God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, 18 to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." 21 So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

4 And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." 27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. 28 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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." 29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, 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. 31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

1 Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. 4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up — for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth,

and there was no one to till the ground; 6 but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground — 7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. 8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. 9 Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant 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.

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

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

18 Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” 19 So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. 20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 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 its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Who are the main characters in this narrative, and how would you define their relationships?

What privileges and responsibilities are given to the man and the woman, and what does that say about God's purposes for humanity and the world?

This is a wonderfully poetic and highly structured account, and it makes little sense to seek from it answers to questions it's not asking. There are no scientific pretensions here

and the issues of big bang and biological origins are not on the agenda; there is not even history, in the sense of any attempt to calculate the ages and time-frames of various events. But there is truth, truth powerfully communicated. One of the most effective tools for political communication, for example, is the cartoon, where very sharp points can be made with a few strokes of a pen. A cartoon is not a photograph, nor is it a paragraph, and in fact, is all the more powerful because it speaks in its own way.

These first few chapters of Genesis are a bit like that, powerfully true, without claiming to be rigorous science or researched history. In this account, God makes things so by the speaking of a word, magnificent in his authority. First he establishes the three great realms in the first three days (the heavens where the lights dwell, the sky and the waters, and the dry land); in the following three days he fills those realms with his creatures (the stars and especially the sun and the moon, the fish and the birds, and the land dwelling creatures including humankind). The result is excellent (“and indeed, it was very good”); the power is straightforward and honourable. And there are three crucial points that are clear from this effortless creative work.

- a. **God is the source of all that is:** the fundamental Christian conviction is that there are really only two sorts of things, God and everything else ... and God created everything else out of nothing.

Read 1 Corinthians 8.4-6.

1Cor. 8:4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

What are the basic elements of reality outlined in this passage?

And so, what does Paul say about the purpose of humanity?

God is the unrivalled Lord of all that is, because he is the unique source of all that is. As such he has ownership and authority over the world and everyone in it. This is entirely familiar pattern to us – a friend of mine is an artist, perhaps the profession closest in kind to the Creator God. Seemingly without too much effort, and with a few flicks of the wrist,

she makes pictures and images come to life, mixing colours and shapes in a beautiful way. She owns those pictures, and takes rightful pride in them. For someone else to claim them as their own work would be a serious injustice. At the same time, for those pictures to hang in, and bring glory to, another house, would also be wrong. That's the sort of pattern we see here as the first truth of the Genesis story. God is the great artist. He makes everything, not by bringing together already existing materials like paint and canvas, but from absolute scratch, by the sheer power of his will. And therefore everything that he has made is his, it belongs to him by right, by right of creation. What is so wonderful about this is that God's creations are not only objects, like paintings and sculptures; God's creatures include human beings, in all their magnificent variety, including you and me. What's more, there is a flip side to this. It also means that our creator God is the only worthy object of our worship, the only one to whom we should give ultimate love and loyalty, the only one to whom we should bring glory.

Think about another implication of this. A little while ago, I was speaking to someone about God, and he said to me that he had nothing to do with God, and that they had come to a mutually satisfactory arrangement – he left God alone and God left him alone, there was simply no relationship. Actually, that's dead wrong. God has everything to do with my friend, and never leaves him alone, precisely in the sense that God is his creator and therefore also his sustainer. In fact, everyone and everything has a relationship with this Lord, whether or not they like or recognise it – the relationship of being a creature. Everyone and everything has been brought into existence and is sustained in existence by this Lord.

This sequence of thought has one final step to go. If it's true that God has made each and every one of us; and if it's true therefore that each and every one of us has a relationship with God, then we can say one more thing. Right here we have an answer to one of the biggest questions of all – what is the meaning of life, where can fulfilment and satisfaction be found? And the answer is that it is in relationship with this creator Lord that creatures find fulfilment and joy. He has made us, he sustains us, and it is as we are connected to him that we experience the satisfaction for which our souls thirst. On the other hand, the attempt to reject this relationship is the essence of what the Bible calls sin.

One common alternative to this Biblical presentation is a point of view that is known as dualism – that is, the idea that there was some other 'stuff' alongside God from eternity, 'stuff' which was not created by God. Often this 'stuff' is held to be bad in some way, evil. One of the most influential philosophers in the world, Plato, seems to have held just this view. We see it in the common logo of 'yin and yang'; by means of a simple picture, a big idea is communicated, that somehow the black and the white are both necessary for the whole, that they define each other and in a sense complement each other. From this perspective, God created the world, not out of nothing, but out of this 'stuff', in the same way that humans create, bringing together pre-existing materials.

However, there are two serious objections to this. The first is intuitive. You see, the dire consequence of this view is that evil is eternal, existing along with God for all time. It is neither subject to God, nor able to be defeated by God. In other words, there can be no ultimate hope on this un-Biblical view, which is so contrary to our best intuitions about the way the world ought to be. But there is a second objection to dualism as well. Our best scientific knowledge indicates that the world in fact is not eternal, but came into existence, in what we call the Big Bang. This event is what is known as 'absolute singularity', an entirely unique and non-repeatable event, where all matter, time and space came into existence. Interestingly, it was atheist scholars who sought vigorously to oppose the evidence of the Big Bang when the theory was being developed, since they understood that if the universe had a beginning, it was therefore not eternal but rather must have had a cause, and the only logical cause would be God.

The truth is that there are only two sorts of things, God and everything else ... and God made everything else out of nothing. And that means that evil is not part of the way things have always been; and even more importantly, therefore, evil need not be part of the way things will always be.

b. The creation is dependent, and yet real and good: the second crucial thing that is affirmed by the Biblical picture of creation is a function of the first – all that God has created is utterly dependent upon Him for its existence and life. It is distinct from God, and of a different order of being from God, in that it is dependent. However, crucially, this dependence relationship is not bad; rather it is good, precisely because creation gains its existence from the good God.

Read 1 Timothy 4.1-5.

1Tim. 4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. 3 They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; 5 for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer.

What is the 'deceit' that Paul is combating in this passage?

What is Paul's response to this 'deceit'?

The Christian understanding of the First Days means that God is not the only thing that exists. This is not as silly as it sounds. As it turns out, a significant aspect of many Eastern religions is that there really is only one thing, god, the great ocean of being, the One, and that all the different bits of the world are in some sense part of, or emanations from, this god. On this view, the problems in the world stem from the way that people constantly emphasise and act on their difference from others, rather than their fundamental unity and identity with others. At one level, it is an attractive view – if you’ve ever been bushwalking, and come to the end of long climb, and looked back down a long, magnificent tree-covered valley, you may well have had the sense of ‘being one with nature’. In so far as it goes, that is a Christian feeling, recognising that both that valley and I are creatures of God. But the Eastern religions go one step further, and say that this unity-of-being is itself divine, and therefore I gain my value from partaking of this ‘divine spirit’. Shirley MacLean, an actress-turned-pop-philosopher famously once declared, “I am god”, and it was precisely this view that she was expressing – not that she herself created the universe, but that at the core of her being was the divine spark, a little bit of the shared being god. Of course, it’s clear where this idea leads – to worship each other, or more commonly, to worship oneself is entirely proper, since it is to worship god!

But the Christian understanding of creation shows this to be a tragic cul-de-sac. It is just not the case is God the only good thing that exists, nor does something have to be the same as God to be good. God has created a whole world of creatures that are distinct from him and dependent upon him for their life, and this dependence-in-distinction is good. It is not something to be evaded, a slavery to throw off, any more than a yo-yo gains its freedom by cutting its string! It needs the string, and it needs the hand which gives it energy and movement, and that need is not a bad thing, it’s just the way things were made.

Three further things follow from this train of thought – first, because God is good, purely good, what (and who) he makes is also fundamentally good and valuable. It may become corrupted, but that does not change the fact that it was made good. As one kid graffitied, “God made me, and God don’t make trash!”. Second, it means that creatures are agents – that is, they have real capacities to act in the world. As people who have been made by God, we make choices, and are responsible for those choices, morally responsible. God has not made us robots, nor even as little parts of his own being, but genuinely distinct creatures, who are free to choose how they live in the world which God has made, and answerable to their creator for those choices. And third, echoing a previous point, the fulfilment of creatures is not found in their becoming less creaturely, but rather in embracing that dependence relationship with God in thanks and trust and obedience.

c. **God creates in freedom and with purpose:** the third crucial thing that follows from the fact that God made us flows from these first two. God created the heavens and the earth not because he had to, as though he were under any compulsion or need, but simply because he wanted to. He created out of his great love, and according to his own good

purpose.

Read Psalm 104.

Psa. 104:1 Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty, 2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent, 3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters, you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, 4 you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers. 5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken. 6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. 7 At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight. 8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys to the place that you appointed for them. 9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. 10 You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, 11 giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. 12 By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. 13 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. 14 You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, 15 and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart. 16 The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. 17 In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. 18 The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. 19 You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. 20 You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. 21 The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. 22 When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. 23 People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening. 24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. 25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. 26 There go the ships, and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it. 27 These all look to you to give them their food in due season; 28 when you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. 29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. 30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. 31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works — 32 who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke. 33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. 34 May my meditation be pleasing to him, for I rejoice in the LORD. 35 Let sinners be consumed from the earth, and let the wicked be no more. Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD

Why is God said to have created in this wonderfully rich Psalm?

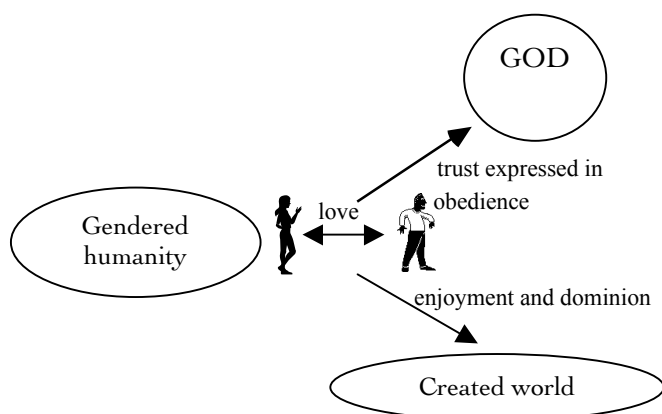
What is included in God's great work of creation? How does the Psalm picture God's involvement in his creation?

It is persons who act deliberately and on the basis of love. A popular view of God is that he is some kind of force, perhaps like gravity, that has a vague influence on our lives, but is basically irrelevant. But love and relationship and jealousy are in the heart of God. He is a profoundly personal reality, with intentions and hopes and disappointments, and so the only adequate kind of response to God is equally a personal response. God's love for us calls for a corresponding love for him in return; God's commitment to us is adequately matched only by a corresponding commitment and loyalty to him. A little while ago I spoke to someone who said they "believed all the stuff about God, but didn't practice it". But that's a contradiction in terms - to believe in the God who is there, the creator God who made us and everything else, is to know him as wonderfully personal, and to know him is to love him, to respond as personally as his creation of us.

What's more, God is not fickle, here today and gone tomorrow. On the contrary, God remains steadfast in his love and fixed in his purpose. He has not lost control of his world or abandoned his purposes for it, but rather remains determined to see his creation brought to fulfilment. This is what the Christian message is all about. Therefore, the completion of God's work of creation, what Christians call redemption, will include the whole created order, rather than destroy or replace it. It is this hope which gives meaning and direction to our lives and all life.

God, humanity and the world

Each of these players receives sharp definition. Notice that God is transcendent, existing in a different way from everything else - while other things are dependent and temporal, God is necessary and eternal. Notice that the world is given the wonderful gift of life,



dependent on God and sustained by him. And notice the way in which humanity is given a special place within the creation. On the one hand, it shares with the world the good dependent reality of being a creature. Human beings were created to live in a trust relationship with God, expressing itself in thankful obedience to Him.

At the same time, in distinction from the world, humanity is created in God's image and likeness, ruling and exercising dominion over the rest of creation under God, capable of moral responsibility and choice. And a crucial part of that task is to multiply, to enjoy the fact that God has made humanity 'male and female', to unite together in love.

One final thing. Jumping ahead a little, the Christian conviction is that the One who is our Saviour and Redeemer, God in Christ, is none other than the One who is our Creator. This

is vital for 2 reasons. First, it means that he has the power to do something about the human condition, and is not himself merely subject to it. Even the most outstanding human leader or teacher is still part of the problem as much as part of the solution, and so in the end might be able to describe the goal of a better world, but can't establish it. And second, it means that our Saviour and Redeemer has the moral authority to save us, and is not just some Clint Eastwood-like brooding stranger who rides unannounced into a town to deal with the bad guys, and then rides out again into the sunset. No, this one is our maker, and saves us out of love for us and commitment to us. Precisely because he is already the Lord upon whom everyone and everything is utterly dependent, he has the right to command us and therefore demand our obedience, and the ability to make and keep promises and therefore expect our trust.

So what?

There are some truths that don't make much difference to you - it's true that it's almost impossible to fold any piece of paper in half more than 10 times (have a try and see for yourself!), but it's completely irrelevant to life. What we have seen in this session is not like that; these are truths that make all the difference in the world.

I guess the most important 'so what?' conclusion is this: it puts the question to you, are you thankful? What we have seen today is that the life that you have is not from yourself, it is a gift, a gift of love. And the only thing that makes sense when you receive a gift of love is to say thanks. I don't think I really got this until I became a parent, which is maybe even closer to the job description of God than an artist. Being a parent involves an unending sequence of gifts of love - so many sleepless nights and bedside songs, so many meals prepared only to be hurled around the room, so many nappies of appalling description to be changed (what a great day it was when I changed my last nappy. I have some friends who recently had a baby, and they invited me to change their baby's nappy - I think they were suffering temporary insanity from sleep deprivation!). The only thing that makes sense from children is to be thankful, deeply in their hearts. There is no point in trying to repay what our parents give us, they don't do it for that. Thankfulness from the heart is what's right. On the other hand, ingratitude from children to parents who have loved and cared for them is atrocious, there are few things that are worse.

What God has done for you is so much more even than your parents have done for you. He is your creator, he made you down to the finest detail. He is your sustainer, who keeps you blood pumping and your heart beating. And the question is, how thankful are you to this, your Creator God?

We can summarise the key ideas from the Bible on the 'First Days' like this:

This is God's world...

a. God

- made the world
- continues to sustain it

b. World

- to reflect his power and goodness
- to be a place of life and peace

c. Humanity

- to enjoy and rule the world
- to thank, obey and trust God

