

## The Story of God and Us: Creation

The first two chapters of Genesis paint two pictures of God creating the earth and all that inhabit it. The Psalms and the Book of Job also attest to God's creation.

- Psalm 8: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established... You have given [humans] dominion over the works of your hands"
- Psalm 19: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork"
- Psalm 33: "Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be"
- Psalm 74: "You have fixed all the bounds of the earth"
- Psalm 102: "Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands"
- Job 38: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"

How was creation brought about? The first word of the Old Testament gives us a clue. In Hebrew,  $\kappa$  means both "in" and "when" equally, but there is a real difference between the two in meaning.

- "In the beginning" implies that there was nothing, and that God, by creating the heavens and the earth, brought about something - creatio ex nihilo.
- Understanding  $\kappa$  as "when" implies that the earth was without form and void - something existed but it was worthless. God took the chaotic mess and made it good: "the confinement of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation."<sup>1</sup>
- Which is it? Both! This narrative tells us different things about God: God brought into existence things that had not existed, and God took things that were a mess and made them beautiful.

God calls creation good, not perfect (Genesis 1:31). God commanded Adam and Eve to subdue the earth, implying that it was not perfectly under control.<sup>2</sup> Even from the beginning, God was working through an evolutionary world, which is how we account for hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural evils. God can, of course, bring good out of the evil, but God does not cause evil. In addition to an evolutionary world, humankind's sinfulness bears weight on creation that leads to natural evils. Pollution, carbon emissions,

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<sup>1</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1994), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 31.

and abuse of natural resources all contribute to crises with the natural order. The resulting natural evils are not punishment from God, but natural consequences of reckless behavior.

In the first creation narrative, on the second half of day six, God created “humankind” in God’s image. The plural form indicates scores and scores of people. Individually, we are not created as the image of God, for this leads to idolatry. As a group, all of humankind is created in the image of God. If you want to know what God looks like, look around at a multitude of people. The creation of the multitude in the first narrative suggests no preference in terms of gender. The second creation narrative, however, has been used to contend that men are more favored than women. This overlooks that there is a perfectly good Hebrew word for man (אִישׁ) but that is not the word used in Genesis 2. The Hebrew word used here is “Adam” (אָדָם), which means “humanity.” Specifying gender was not crucial at this point in the narrative. Later, when God creates a helper for Adam, the word used is עֹזֵר, which is commonly used in the Hebrew Bible to describe God (cf. Psalm 115:9-11). God would not be described as subservient or lower than the person that God is helping, and thus the helpmate in Genesis 2 should not be cast into a lower role than Adam. Every human is of equal value and worth.

From the second creation narrative, we learn that humans were put into the garden “to till and to keep the land.” It seems that the original task assigned to humans by God is to work. But the word for till (עָבַד) has two meanings: to work and to worship. God’s original design for humankind was that they would work and worship.

1. Read Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Why do you think that both stories are recorded in the Bible? What can we learn from their similarities and differences?
2. Why do you think it was important for the Israelites to have a story of origin?
3. Have you seen examples in your own life of God creating by bringing something new into existence and/or by taking chaos and creating order out of it?
4. What does it mean to you that humankind is created in the image of God? What responsibilities does that give to humans?
5. Though we are created in the image of God, in what ways are we not just like God?
6. If you see work as a negative thing, how does it affect your view to know that God gave Adam and Eve the calling to work in the garden **before** the toil of work was made a part of their punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge?
7. What does it mean for us today to “till and keep the land”?
8. In what ways do you see the love and goodness of God displayed through the creation stories?