

Part IV: Understanding the Old Testament

1: Creation

Setting the Stage

The Bible tells a story. We tend to view the Bible as a bunch of fragmented bits of history, poetry, and moral tales, but in reality, the Bible tells a story. And it's a *true* story. It's a story that gives meaning to our existence, our daily lives, and to every other story on earth.

As you read through the Bible, pay attention to the story that is unfolding. But don't imagine that you're merely looking into the past when you read this story. This is a story that has yet to be finished. Though Revelation ties up the loose ends and tells us how the story will come to a close, we're not there yet. The story continues, and each and every one of us has a role to play. But we won't be able to play our part until we buy into the story so deeply that it shapes everything about our lives.

Ultimately, this is a story about God, the world He created, and the incredible plan of redemption that unfolds as He creates a people for His own glory. As you walk through key points in the biblical story over the weeks ahead, make sure you place yourself within this story. How do the actions, events, and truths presented in the story touch your life? How should you live now in light of this amazing story?

The passage you will consider in this session (Genesis 1–2) sets the stage for the rest of the Bible. In this section, we see the world as it should be. We see God crafting a world that is everything He desires it to be—no sin, no imperfection, everything glorifies God perfectly. Understanding this first part of the story will help us understand everything that follows.

1. Read Genesis 1–2. As you read, look for elements that will help orient you to the biblical story. Who are we introduced to in this section? What is being emphasized? What seems to be the point? After reading these two chapters, make some notes below.

Who Is God?

The story begins with familiar words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” With these words we are introduced to the most important character in the story. It's interesting that although these are the first words in the entire Bible, the author doesn't pause to tell us theologically or philosophically who God is. There are many questions that we could ask at this point: Where did God come from? What was He doing before He created? Why is He creating in the first place?

But Genesis proceeds in a different manner. The author teaches us about God by simply telling us what He did: He created. We're going to find out so much more about God as the story unfolds, and at points we will get specific theological answers to some of the questions we may have. But it's important to let the story drive our understanding of who God is.

2. *Take a minute to reflect on what you read in Genesis 1–2. What do God’s actions in this passage reveal about who He is?*

This Is God’s World

Perhaps the most obvious thing that we see in this passage is God’s absolute power and unrivaled glory. The story starts with Him alone. There is great significance to the fact that God is the only character in Genesis 1. He is the only eternal person or thing in the universe. This means that nothing else can be equated or even compared with Him.

Allow yourself to feel the weight of this for a minute. There was a time when our universe did not exist. Immediately before our world began, God existed—and that’s it! Then God began creating our world out of nothing simply by speaking. He told land to form and it obeyed. He called light into being and it happened. Every single thing in our universe came into existence in obedience to God’s command.

Try to get a feel for the absolute difference between this all-powerful God who has always existed and the creation that He called forth through the repeated refrain: “Let there be _____.” There is no person, force, or thing that can compete with God or claim any importance in comparison with Him. It is this absolute distinction between God and everything else that leads the angels in heaven to cry out, “Holy! Holy! Holy!”

3. *How should God’s eternity and power in the creation account affect the way we view and relate to Him?*

We cannot read Genesis 1–2 without realizing that this world belongs to God. If we were to begin with our own perception of the world, we might get the sense that the world belongs to us, that we are the rightful rulers of this planet. But Genesis tells a different story. God lovingly and powerfully created this world. No person or thing had any place in this world until God put it in its proper place. God alone can claim ownership of this world because He spoke it into existence.

This should lead us to great humility about our place in this world. We are not the center of the universe. God created this world and graciously placed us in the midst of it. But all ownership and authority belongs to God. As we will see, God does delegate a certain authority to us, but this is a derived authority, graciously given to us by God to be used in a specific manner. Any attempt to claim power for ourselves independent of God is like a clay pot challenging the authority of the potter who formed it. (This is an image, by the way, which Scripture uses to describe the foolishness of challenging God—see Is. 29:15–16, 45:9–10, and Rom. 9:19–24.)

4. How should God's power, authority, and ownership affect the way we view our place in this world?

In the Image of God

After creating every detail of every aspect of the universe in which we live, God looked at everything He had made and declared it good. But in the midst of this episode of creation, God paused to confer with Himself:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen. 1:26).

There is something absolutely unique about humanity. On the one hand, we are utterly unlike God because, just like everything else in creation, He made us. But on the other hand, *God specifically created us to be like Him*. This is impossible to wrap our minds around, but God created us like Him in some respect and then set us in the midst of this world to represent Him!

There is a lot of debate about what exactly the "image of God" is. Everyone seems to agree that being created in God's image is more than a physical resemblance—He is *Spirit*, after all (John 4:24). Suggestions as to what God's image in humanity consists of are varied: our ability to reason, our ability to make moral decisions, our personalities, and our capacity for relationships are all leading views. Others suggest that the image of God relates to the dominion over the rest of creation that God gave to man (this ties Gen. 1:26–27 to Gen. 1:28).

Perhaps it is best not to attach the image of God to any one faculty or attribute of humanity. In the New Testament, we are told that Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Jesus is said to be "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). It seems that being the "image of God" is about reflecting God in some way. Jesus did this perfectly, but humanity has also been given a responsibility to show God to the world—His handiwork, nature, and attributes are displayed in us in a way that they are not displayed in the rest of the creation. (Of course, this image has been tainted by sin, but that comes later in the story.)

In the ancient world, kings would set up an image of themselves as a visual announcement of who was in charge. It reminded the king's own people and the surrounding nations that this land was under the king's jurisdiction and authority. Psalm 8 says that God placed human beings in a privileged position amid the universe He created—it says we are "crowned with glory and honor" and that we have been given dominion over the works of God's hands (v. 5). It seems that God made people to humbly and graciously mediate His rule on the earth. Human beings stand as a reminder that God is the King of this world.

So rather than trying to identify the image of God with a specific aspect of the human condition, perhaps we should simply acknowledge that God made us to reflect Him to the world. We represent to the world its rightful King and we illustrate His workmanship, attributes, and characteristics.

5. *In your own words, describe why it is significant that God created us “in His image.” How should this affect the way we view ourselves and the people around us?*

The Personal God of Genesis 2

Something interesting happens when we move from Genesis 1 into Genesis 2. In chapter 1, God is referred to by the title “Elohim,” which simply means “God.” It’s a lot like referring to a person based on his or her title: “Doctor, Professor, President, King,” etc. But when we get to chapter 2, the name for God changes. Now He is referred to as “Yahweh Elohim,” which combines the title “God” with a personal name: Yahweh. (For good but complicated reasons, most English translations render *Yahweh* as *the LORD* (notice it’s in all caps).)

This is significant because God tends to use His personal name, Yahweh, when He is relating to His people in a personal way. God uses the name Yahweh when He enters into a covenant with His people. When God makes a covenant, He specifies what His relationship to His people will look like, makes them promises, and often charges them to be obedient in return. The personal name Yahweh is appropriate for this type of interaction.

Genesis 2 is a much more intimate account of the world’s origins than Genesis 1. Whereas Genesis 1 gives a broad overview of how the world was made, Genesis 2 takes that account for granted and tells the story in a much more specific way. It tells the story of humanity—created in God’s own image—and the privileges and responsibilities that God gave them.

We see God doing something unique with humanity. God first formed Adam out of the ground, then bent down and breathed life into his nostrils. This is a much more intimate form of creation than we saw in chapter 1, where God simply spoke the world into existence. Notice also that God spoke directly with the man in chapter 2. He told Adam about the garden—in particular, He told Adam what he could and could not eat. Right away we see that humanity was made to communicate with God. Even in his perfect state (before sin entered the world), Adam was dependent on revelation from God in order to live in the world that God made.

And then notice that God did not want the man to be alone. This is the first time that God said something was “not good.” He created a “helper fit for Adam.” It’s easy to imagine God enjoying His relationship with Adam and lovingly watching Adam enjoy the perfect companion that God made for him. While it is important to see the implications for marriage inherent in this passage, we should also see that God did not want man to live in isolation. God solved Adam’s loneliness by creating a wife for him, but keep in mind that Eve was not just a wife—she was another human being. In other words, God designed human beings to live in relationship with other human beings. This will have major implications when we begin discussing the concept of the church in the New Testament.

6. *What can we learn about human beings and their relationship with God and each other by reading Genesis 2?*

Life in the Garden

Genesis 1–2 also gives us an amazing vision of what God originally intended the world to be. After creating the earth and everything in it, God took the time to plant a garden (2:8). God placed people in the midst of this garden and gave them the specific task of “working it and keeping it” (Gen. 2:15).

We sometimes think that work is the product of the fall, a punishment for sin. When humanity sinned, God cursed the ground, and labor became frustrating and painful (Gen. 3:17–19). But God’s original intention for people was that we would be actively involved in caring for the creation. God placed Adam in the garden (keep in mind that a garden is different from a wilderness or jungle in that it is tended, planned, and ordered) and gave him the specific task of working it.

God intended for humanity to have a caring relationship with the surrounding world. God gave people dominion over the creation, placing it under their feet (Gen. 1:28 and Ps. 8:5–8), not so that they could exploit and destroy the earth, but so that they could lovingly care for it as a good creation of God meant to be protected and enjoyed.

It is also fascinating to read the account of Adam naming the animals (2:18–20). Here we get another taste of the interaction between God and humanity in a perfect world. Surely God could have named the animals on His own, but He chose to give them names by working together with Adam. At this early point in the story, it is clear that God’s rule over the earth will be exercised in conjunction with His chief creation, Adam.

We cannot miss the peace, harmony, and perfect beauty described in Genesis 1–2. It gives us a picture of the world as it was meant to be. It is a world that we all long for. But this is only the beginning of the story. As we will see in the next session (and as we all know from experience), something has gone tragically wrong. But this peaceful picture where everything works in perfect harmony with everything else will reappear. The paradise that we lost will eventually be regained—surpassed even—when Jesus returns to set the world to rights.

7. *Take some time to consider the picture of the world presented in Genesis 1–2. Why is this picture so appealing? Which aspects of life in the garden of Eden should we long to see restored in our world?*



Watch the video for this session.