

27 September 2009

The Reason for the Entire Story

Readings: Gen. 1:1-3, 26-31; 3:1-8, 21-24; 6:5-8; 9:8-11; 11:1-9; 12:1-3.

Eleven chapters in one sermon! Why would anyone in their right mind attempt such a thing? (That's a rhetorical question, by the way)! Actually, the reason is that we are at the beginning of a series on the life of *Abraham*. And we can only appreciate the significance of Abraham in the light of the eleven chapters that precede his arrival on the scene. Indeed, the truths contained in these eleven chapters prepare the way for all that is said in the rest of Scripture.

Of course, these chapters have often been a battleground. Some laugh at them and see them as a collection of slightly-doctored myths. Others understand them literally. Still others believe that they convey important truths in the form of, let's just say, parables. But I am not going to get into that discussion this morning. That's not because I am afraid to do so. In fact, we are looking at some of these approaches on Wednesday evenings. The reason is that these chapters contain some important spiritual truths and convey a vital message. There is a time and a place to face such questions, but we would be wasting precious time were we to consider them this morning.

So let's look at this *message*. To do so, I am going to mention four major episodes and then focus for a few minutes on a grand theme that runs through these chapters.

Now that could take a long time, but I am reminded of Rex Murphy's perceptive but sardonic comments about Colonel Gaddafi's rambling speech of well over an hour at the United Nations, so I shall try not to be too long.

So here are the four major episodes. I shall focus on the first two and comment briefly on the third and fourth:

1. THE FIRST, STRANGELY ENOUGH, IS THE ABSOLUTELY SUBLIME ACCOUNT WE HAVE OF CREATION IN CHAPTER ONE.

Suppose I were to describe the origin of the universe something like this. There was a primeval ocean upon which there was a giant egg. From the egg was born the sun god who had four children. As a result of rivalries among those children, creation took place. That was the explanation in Egypt when Moses was around.

Or suppose I suggested that the world rested on the backs of three elephants which in turn stood on the back of a giant tortoise which swam around in a cosmic sea. That explanation was current in India at the time.¹

¹John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 37.

A Germanic creation story has it that the world was made of the corpse of the giant Ymir, the sea of his blood, the heaven of his skull, and the clouds of his brains.²

A Sublime Account

But the Hebrew Bible starts with the simple but grand declaration: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” There is no attempt to explain God’s existence for the human author knew him as the one who said “I AM WHO I AM.”

Creatio Ex Nihilo

After the phrase “In the beginning” (one word in Hebrew) comes the word for create (*bārā*). In itself, it does not have to mean “creation out of nothing.” But in Scripture, it is only ever used to describe the action of God. Only God creates! Other words are used to describe the activity of God, words translated “made” and “formed.”

It is clear from other verses of Scripture that this first verse of Scripture *does* refer to creation out of nothing.³ In Hebrews 11:3 we read, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” The Psalmist asserts, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, the starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6). And speaking of God’s eternal Son, Paul says, “By him *all* things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible . . . all things were created by him and for him” (Col 1:16). The heavenly beings around the throne worship him who lives for ever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne and say:

You are worthy, our Lord and God
to receive glory honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being’ (Rev 4:10-11).

A Matter of Days

We do *not* have to believe, with Bishop Ussher and John Lightfoot, that the universe was created between the 17th and 24th October 4004 BC, with Adam having been created at 9:00 am on the 23rd.

Some see the days as epochs, lengthy periods over which God’s creative activity continued. (By the way, the Hebrew word *yōm* does not have to signify a 24 hour day).

²Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began: Man in the First Chapters of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 21-2.

³C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg: R and R Publishing, 2006), 50, 67-8.

Astrophysicist Hugh Ross, for example, argues that the universe is 13.73 billion years old and that there is a definite correspondence between the days of creation in Genesis 1 and the ages of creation.⁴

Others are not so sure that we should regard the days of Genesis 1 as describing the chronology of creation. They choose to emphasize the important theological truths contained in the chapter. Indeed, the Bible's intent is certainly not to give us a scientific explanation of creation. We miss the whole purpose of Scripture if we get hung up on cosmology, as interesting as it is. I'm with Bruce Waltke when he says: "The creation account is a highly sophisticated presentation, designed to emphasize the sublimity (power, majesty and wisdom) of the Creator God and to lay the foundations for the worldview of the covenant community."⁵ Let's not try to make the Bible into what God never intended it to be.

Think of it, in one simple statement, atheism, polytheism, pantheism, and materialism are negated: "In the beginning *God*" (there goes atheism and polytheism); "In the beginning God *created*" (there goes pantheism – the view that everything is part of God, and materialism – the view that matter is eternal).

The most important thing about this chapter is the place occupied in it by the creation of mankind.

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

²⁷ So God created human beings in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

This is what it's all about. Everything else is preparatory. Stars and planets are lifeless and inanimate, but need to exist if life on one planet is to be possible. No other creature is created *in God's image*. Whatever is wrapped up in that little statement, it makes us the crown of God's creation, essentially different from all other created beings, capable of having a relationship with God based on freedom and not on necessity. And he creates us to be his vice-regent. The picture is one of immense privilege and rich intimacy.

⁴Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2004).

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 56.

The chapter is punctuated by the observation after each of creation: “And God saw that it was good”. The Hebrew word *ṭob* (good) recurs like a punctuation mark. Then, after the sixth day, we read, “God saw all that he had made, and it was *very* good.”

This sets the stage for the high drama of the next two chapters.

2. IF WE ARE CREATED IN GOD’S IMAGE, IT IS OF VITAL IMPORTANCE THAT WE RELATE TO HIM NOT OUT OF CONSTRAINT BUT IN FREEDOM.

So we read of a beautiful, well-watered garden in which God places mankind. It is full of all kinds of trees, “pleasing to the eye and good for food.” but two are of particular importance: the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The command is explicit: “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die” (Gen 3:16-17).

The Father of Lies

The serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. I am going to stop right here. This week I was asked a good question: “Was this just a snake? Was it Satan? Or was it Satan speaking through a snake? Well, if we only had this account to go by, we would probably have to conclude that it was a talking snake. You see, in the progressive revelation of God, we don’t read much about Satan until the later books of the Old Testament. There’s a good reason for that. But that does not mean he didn’t exist at this stage. Right towards the end of Scripture, we are given a picture of his demise: “The great dragon was hurled down, that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan who leads the whole world astray . . .” (Rev 12:9).

Listen to Satan. He’s true to form. No wonder Jesus described him as “the father of lies” (John 8:44).

He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' "

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Gen 3:1-6).

He starts a religious discussion by asking an innocent-sounding question but giving the thing a convenient twist (“any”). Then comes a flat denial. And he even impugns God’s motives.

I love the way the German theologian and ethicist, Helmut Thielicke, dramatized the account:

Serpent

“So, (Eve), you dare not eat of any of the beautiful trees here in the garden - God keeps a pretty tight hand on you doesn’t he?

Eve

Oh no, God is very generous; we can eat of all the trees in the garden. We can freely enjoy everything that life has to offer. No, my good serpent, we need have no inhibitions about what comes from the hand of God. There is only one point at which God will not be trifled with. We dare not touch the tree in the midst of the garden. There is one place where God wants us to realize that we are only human, that though we are like God, we are not equal with God, and that we must be content to remain within these limits, the limits of humanity.

Serpent

“Surely it is sheer nonsense to think that God would let you die and perish utterly just because you don’t take him so terribly in earnest, but rather just partly seriously. You will not die. The question of God is not that serious my dear lady! All honor to your respect for him. I take my hat off to your display of piety, but really now, he’s not *that* serious about it.

God has forbidden you to eat this fruit only because he knows very well that your eating it will endow you with a secret knowledge. But knowledge is power. And God is afraid of it. He wants to keep you on a short leash so you humans will not get beyond his control. He’s afraid that you will compete with him and that his little divine throne may totter if you discover the tremendous potential that lies in your human reason and the enormous leverage you could bring to bear if you call a general strike.”

“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Gen 3:6).

The Real Problem

We cannot but be struck by the immediacy of the change. Immediately they are aware of their nakedness (In Scripture, nakedness is associated with shame). They sew fig leaves together as a make-shift covering. They hear a sound that hitherto had brought them delight. It is the sound LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

And they are afraid! So they slink off hoping to hide among the trees. What tragedy. Their shame is now compounded by stupidity. Hide from the LORD God? How, on earth can one do that? But sin affects our sanity.

We soon discover that there is marital tension. “(Adam) have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

Listen to him, “It was *the woman* . . . it was the woman *you* put here.” No longer an exclamation of joy, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh . . .” The LORD asks Eve, “What have you done?” And she responds, “It was the serpent.” And, as you know, the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand upon!

Now, no matter how literally we take this passage, clearly *it is about more than appealing fruit!* The whole point here is that we have an assertion of independence. Or, as someone said, “The problem was not with the apple on the tree, but with the ‘pair’ on the ground.” God said: “I’ll give you everything imaginable. I will crown you with glory and honor. You are the pinnacle of my creation! But you *are* my creation. You are created in my image, but I am God and you are mankind! Submission to me is the inevitable consequence of the way things are and need to be!

So, in effect, we chose not to be genuinely human in the fullest sense of that word.

The Second Adam

I must move ahead to the one who is described as “the second Adam” (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45). Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased. At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days being tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:11-13).

At the end of that period, when he was famished, the Serpent came to him in the guise of a friend. As he did in the garden, he gain questions and distorts the word of God. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to be made bread.” But Jesus answers, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” Twice more Satan appeals to him to use his divine prerogatives for personal advantage, to declare his independence from God. And, as man, Jesus resists him. He does so, not by flexing his divine muscles, but by submitting to his Father.

Here’s the thing. In Jesus, God did what we had refused to do. Man had refused to be man as God intended man to be. So God became human and, as a man, he lived in appropriate submission, as man ought to live.⁶ The great second century church father,

⁶⁶John’s Gospel, in particular, shows how Jesus lived in constant submission to the Father. Though he was himself divine, he lived as man ought to live.

Irenaeus, put it this way: “He became what we are that he might bring us to be what he himself is.”

As I intimated, I am not going to spend much time on the other two key episodes. But I do need to point out that . . .

3. THERE IS AN OBSERVABLE DOWNHILL SLIDE IN CHAPTERS FOUR TO ELEVEN.

Cain murders his brother, Abel (Gen 4:1-12). We hear the bombastic boast of a man called Lamech (Gen 4:23-24). By the time we reach chapter 6, we read: “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5). He sends a flood to check human wickedness. Even after a fresh start, the rebelliousness of the human heart is evident. God instructs Noah’s descendants to be fruitful and increase and fill the earth, but they say to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). From that day on Babel stands as a symbol of human arrogance and insubordination.

But God will not write mankind off.

4. GOD SUMMONS A MAN WHO IS LIVING IN AN IDOLATROUS SOCIETY.

He tells him to leave his country, his people and his father’s household and go to a land which he had never seen (Gen 12:1-3). In choosing Abram, God was not washing his hands of the rest of humanity. On the contrary, it was his commitment to sinful humanity as a whole that caused him to call one man and set in motion a plan that would lead to blessing for the whole of humankind: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:1-3).

Years later, John would write, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . .” (John 3:16). But right here that same love was at work. It was because “God so loved the world” that he called Abram. When God called him, he had Jesus in mind.

From next Sunday, we shall be following this man, learning a great deal about faith and seeing how God’s plan begins to unfold. Right now, I need to point out something that we so easily miss.

5. GOD IS, AND ALWAYS HAS BEEN, “THE GOD OF ALL GRACE.”

When Adam and Eve sinned, he came looking for them, not because he was unaware of what they had done, but because he is gracious.

He knew that the fig leaves were useless, so he provided them with permanent garments. *That too is grace.*

Even as he pronounced judgment, he promised that a member of the human race would ultimately conquer the tempter and put an end to evil. In a cryptic statement to the serpent, he says: “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will bruise his heel” (Gen 3:15). *That is grace!*

He banishes Adam and Eve from the garden, and sends cherubim to guard the way to the tree of life so that they will not eat and live forever in their fallen state. *That is grace.*

Even when he needs to send a flood because of the awful state of humanity, “*Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.*”

There was kindness in his judgment at Babel. Unity in sin is a terrible thing and has dire consequences. His gracious plan may be temporarily thwarted, but he will not permit it to be derailed. Even at Babel, there was grace.

And when God called Abram, he had in mind his distant descendant. For when I turn to the first page of the New Testament, I read: “This is the record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, *the son of Abraham.*” All God’s purposes come to fruition in him. As Paul explained, “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his descendant. The Scripture does not say, ‘And to your descendants,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your descendant,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Gal 3:16). *That was grace!*

God is “the God of all grace.” That does not mean he overlooks our sin like an indulgent grandparent. It means that he goes to astonishing lengths to restore us to a relationship with him. I don’t have to wait for the New Testament to see this. It’s right here in the first part of Genesis.

Conclusion

It may be that you are in hiding today, as Adam was. The good news is that God does not leave you there in the shame of your nakedness. He comes looking and questioning. He comes, not to catch you out, but to pick you up. Yes you may be in church this morning, but you may also be hiding among the metaphorical trees of God’s undeserved blessing. He doesn’t want to leave you there in the misery of your estrangement.

Possibly you have tried to do something religious to patch up the problem. But fig leaves wither and you are in need of permanent garments. Not the fading leaves that *you sew together*, but the leather garment that *God provides as a free gift.*

Perhaps you know all this and have heard his voice and received the covering only he can supply, but you have listened too intently to the persuasive voice of the serpent and doubted God's good intentions. The good news is that he is, and has always been, "the God of all grace."