

## “What the Bible is All About”

Genesis 2:4-17

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We have completed the account of the creation, or so it seems. But part of story, the most important part, needs to be retold in greater detail. Man is the center of the creation, the purpose of it all. That is clear even in chapter 1. But that being so, we need to know more about him. We might think of chapter 1 as a panorama of the creation, while chapter 2 is a close-up. [Collins, 229]

### Text Comment

v.4 The Hebrew word translated “account” in the NIV and, more accurately, “generations” in the ESV, is the Hebrew *toledot*. The idea is something like “family history” or “descendants.” The noun comes from the verb which means “to bear children.” In Genesis this term, in the phrase, “These are the generations of...” is the chapter heading for each of the ten chapters of the book of Genesis. It amounts to saying something like, “This is the account of the line of X.” The chapter thus titled, we will see, is not principally about the person named in the heading, but about his descendants. So the story of Abraham, for example, is given in the *toledot* or “family history” of Terah, Abraham’s father. Some of the *toledots* are nothing but genealogies, others include extended narratives. [Waltke, 17-18; Collins, 101] The next *toledot* appears in 5:1, the next after that in 6:9. Some of the chapters thus created will be quite short, some, like the last that begins in 37:2 and continues to the end of the book, are much longer. These first chapters, then, are about the family history of Adam and Eve.

The remainder of our v. 4 is set in poetic lines. You will see immediately its chiasmic structure, the heavens and the earth at both the beginning and the end, though the terms are reversed, the two statements in the middle doubling one another. We haven’t time to discuss this, but take note of the literary artistry.

v.5 We have two different words for “earth” or “land” used in v. 5 and they refer to two different *kinds* of land: wilderness fit only for grazing and arable land that can be cultivated for crops.

v.7 Here the Lord is depicted as a potter, forming a piece from clay. The same metaphor, by the way, is used in Job 10:8-9, to describe the creation of every human being. What we have here in Genesis 2 is meta-history. It is history, true enough, history in the ordinary sense, but it is also teaching us not only what happened then, but how always to think about human life. There is also an emphasis on man’s connection to the ground, from which he comes and to which he returns, as we will read in 3:19.

The term translated “living creature” is the Hebrew *nephesh*. That term is used of animals as well, as in 1:20-21. But man is different in that God himself deliberately made the man and it was his own breath that gave him life.

- v.8 The interpretation of vv. 5-8 is fraught with complicated problems that would take far too long to explain. So let me give you Jack Collins' summary (we know Jack in this congregation and trust his scholarship, the magisterial scholar he has become *and* his loyalty to the Bible as the Word of God), an interpretation based on Hebrew grammar. Jack is first and foremost a Hebrew grammarian, but also on the viewpoint of the ordinary Israelite who would have been the first hearer of this narrative. An Israelite knew that in that part of the world the rain falls only some of the year and only when it does do the plants spring up. Jack summarizes the verses this way: "In some land, at the end of the dry season, when the ...rain cloud...was rising to begin the rains, God formed the first man; he then planted a garden in Eden and moved the man there. Some time after that he made the woman." [110]

The idea of a garden is that of an enclosed space where plants are cultivated and flourish. The ordinary syntax of the Hebrew verb would suggest that God planted the garden *after* he made the man, not before, as the NIV has it. And it was planted in the east, that is, east of Israel, the viewpoint of the original readers of Genesis.

- v.9 What are these two trees among the lush orchard that God planted? Well, the author does not tell us and so commentators have had to propose explanations of their own. The wisest of these, it seems to me, and most in keeping with the biblical context, is to regard the trees as something like the sacraments, outward signs that confirm us in life or in the discernment that distinguishes between good and evil. They represent the practical consequences of faithfulness or unfaithfulness to God. We will not find the Tree of Life in the Bible again until Revelation, where we find it in heaven.
- v.14 Elsewhere in the Bible the Garden of Eden is represented as a hill or a mountain and so serves as an image of heaven which is likewise represented that way in the Bible. Naturally we want to know where it was. It was in an area called Eden, but where was that? Again, the question is fraught with complications. However, there are plausible arguments for locating it near the present head of the Persian gulf, accepting that the climate of that area is known to have changed dramatically over the millennia, was once much wetter than it is now, and that some of the rivers mentioned here might have dried up meantime. It is also possible and perhaps best to think of the rivers not as *originating in* the Garden but *flowing out* of greater Eden into the Garden as a single watercourse that was fed by four tributaries. In other words, the snapshot is taken looking *upstream* not downstream. Cush could refer to the mountainous regions of western Iran. There is an ancient river bed that has recently been traced that runs from the gold-bearing lands of Arabia near Medina, i.e. Havilah, northeast toward the head of the gulf. This could have been the Pishon. [Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 428-429] It's a fascinating subject with lots of new research to consider, but firm conclusions are hard to come by.

In any case, the garden was a definite place in the world of that time, situated with reference to places known to the original readers of the book. I should say, if only briefly, that this description poses a severe challenge to the flood geology popular among some evangelicals. Flood geology, as you may know, proposes that certainly many if not most

of the topographical features of the earth as we know it are the direct result of Noah's worldwide flood: the sedimentary layers of rock below the earth's surface, the earth's canyons, and so on. However, that would inevitably mean that the world at the time of the creation, before the flood, had a very different topography than the world of Moses' day, after the flood. But Moses describes the world before the flood in terms familiar to those who lived in the world after the flood. That makes it very unlikely that the world was a dramatically different place before the flood than after it. [J.C. Munday Jr., "Eden's Geography Erodes Flood Geology," *WTJ* 58, no. 1 (1996), 123-154]

- v.15 Man was given dominion over the earth, as we read in 1:28, and he exercises that dominion by his work and, particularly, by his stewardship of the world in which God has placed him. Work is noble; it is God's gift by which the life of man is given dignity and importance and through which man gains satisfaction and fulfillment and the world gains blessing. As the poet has it:

Blest work; if thou dost bear God's curse,  
What must his blessing be!

We certainly are aware of the difficulties that come with work in our sinful world, but we are also not unaware of the satisfactions and the blessings that are its reward.

- v.17 But man remains subject to God's will. God has a particular life for man to live and gives him commandments to obey in order that he might live that life. His is a *moral* life, a life of doing what is right. It is important to note at this point that "death" in the Bible, the death that is threatened here for the first time, never means the end of existence. In reference to human beings death always refers to a condition of existence, as does its opposite, "life." More about that as we proceed through these early chapters of Genesis.

Now we know how the story unfolds from this point. And so we take for granted what we have read here. Our real interest tends to be in questions of time and place. But that is a mistake. This early description of human life is nothing short of astonishing and has everything to do with what human life means, what your life means, what my life means, and why they are as they are; why we experience life as we do.

Imagine you didn't know the rest of the story. Imagine that you were reading this narrative for the very first time as an inhabitant of the ancient near eastern world. I remember some years ago coming across the account of one Günter Zuntz, a 20<sup>th</sup> century German classical scholar, thoroughly familiar with the language and culture of the Greco-Roman world. But he had never read the Gospels. He picked up the Gospel of Mark for the first time and read it in its original Greek as someone would have read it in the first century. Afterward he recorded his impressions of what he had read. He had been struck with the fact that, as he put it, "Something very important was being put forward here with a superior purpose and concentration throughout the book... The style and content of the story arouse a feeling of otherness, a feeling that this is not a history like other histories, not a biography like other biographies, but a development of the actions, sayings, and suffering of a higher being on his way through this anxious world of human beings and demons." [Cited in France, *NIGTC*, 6]

Well a thoughtful, first-time reader of his history, especially one thoroughly conversant with the thought and culture of the ancient near east, would think similarly reading this account. This is unlike any other creation account of the ancient world in profound ways. This is a story very different from the others one would have heard read. It is about a very different God and a very different man! There is something not only very different here, but something very much higher, and so much more important. Here we open wide a window on human life.

It is signaled for the first time already in v. 4. As many of you will be aware, for more than a century now, the study of the Pentateuch has been dominated by the theory that the five books that make up the *Torah* are in fact patchworks of four primary sources, composed at various times and stuck together centuries after Moses by an unnamed and unknown editor or redactor. Two of the four sources are referred to as E and J, after the first letter of the German transliteration of the Hebrew names for God, *Elohim* and *Jahve*. This view of things originated in Germany which is why the Yahwist source is abbreviated as “J” not as “Y.” It was for this thinking about the Pentateuch and the view of the historicity of the Bible that came from it that the American evangelist, Billy Sunday, quipped that if you turned hell upside down, you’d find “Made in Germany” on the bottom!

There were always good reasons to doubt this theory about the origin of the Pentateuch, new reasons continue to multiply, and, thankfully, an increasing number of even unbelieving scholars have given it up. But for the moment take note of these facts.

1. In Genesis 1 we have *Elohim*, God, exclusively; 35 times, in fact.
2. Then, suddenly, in 2:4 we have *Yahweh Elohim*, rendered in almost all English translations as “Lord God.”
3. Thereafter we regularly find “Lord God,” as in vv. 5, 7, 8, 9, 15, and so on.

Those facts were taken as evidence that we have two different sources here that a later editor put together: one that used the divine name *Elohim*, the other that used the divine name *Yahweh*. Now, as you are perhaps aware, these divine names reflect different aspects of the divine being and the divine life. *Elohim* is a title as well as a name: “God.” It is like “man” in that way. It is used to designate the deity in his transcendence and in his relationship to the created order. *Yahweh* is a proper name, not a title. The English versions hide this fact from us by translating the word “Lord,” which is not what *Yahweh* means. They translate a name with a title. That is why *Yahweh* has in recent years become more popular as a way of representing the name of the Lord. *Yahweh* is God’s personal name. He gave the knowledge of that name to his people. He expected them to call him by his name. *Yahweh* is, for that reason, used when the reference is to God in his dealings with his people, with those who know him. When you know someone you call that person by his or her name. *Elohim* occurs some 2,600 times in the OT; *Yahweh* nearly 7,000 times. *Yahweh* is the name used by those who know God! [Durham, *Exodus* WBC, 287]

*Yahweh* is used exclusively of Israel’s God. Most of the occurrences of *Elohim* are likewise used of Israel’s God, but when the distinction between the two is observed, the difference between the title and the name is clear. For example, Psalm 19 begins “The heavens declare the glory of God...” God is there *Elohim*, the Deity in reference to the universe. But later in the psalm we

read, “The law *of the Lord*, that is the law “of *Yahweh*,” is perfect, converting the soul...” “Lord” is there the personal name of God, the name by which he is known to his people.

So when we read in 2:4 that “*the Lord God* made the earth and the heavens,” we are being told two fabulously important things: 1) *Elohim and Yahweh* are the same person and 2) Israel’s God, the God who delivered them from bondage in Egypt, who gave his law to his people at Sinai, the God they have come to know as their Savior, is none other than the creator of heaven and earth. We learn in Genesis 1 that the world and all that is in it was created by the one living and true God and that this God made man in his own image. What we now learn in Genesis 2 is that the God who made all things and man in his image is the God who made a covenant with his people Israel. Remember, the people of Israel were the original audience for whom this narrative was written. All other gods are non-entities, illusions.

In other words, the blending of the two divine names that we find in Genesis chapter 2 is not the result of some later editor rather clumsily patching two different sources together. *It is the most fundamental of theological confessions*. The God we know, the God who has revealed himself to us, the God who has saved us, is the only God there is, the God who made the universe, this world, and everything in it, including us! Israel’s covenant partner is the living and true God, the Maker and the Ruler of heaven and earth.

Now, stop and think about this and what it means. What is the truly remarkable, the unique thing about human beings? We have already said that it is that they are made in God’s image and likeness. They are fit for a relationship with God, *you are fit for relationship with God* because you, like all men, have been made like God in important ways. And we see that relationship forming here in Genesis 2. *All men ought to be* in such a relationship with God; that is how matters stood at the beginning!

Now it is not like other relationships with which we are familiar, this relationship between God and man. God is far above us, we are his creatures. How did God communicate with man in the Garden of Eden? We don’t know. God is spirit. He is invisible; so we assume that Adam could not see him. Did he speak in a human voice? Did he appear to the man in a dream or vision? We are not told. But he obviously communicated with him. And man being who he was understood what God was saying. He was a conversation partner of the Almighty, something that couldn’t be said of the other creatures. The Lord gave him instructions as to what he was to do. He was to live and work in this garden that God planted and care for it. And that is what man did. What is more, he was given still more specific instructions. There were two trees in the garden of particular importance, the fruit of one of which trees, he was not to eat. We are not told why; Adam was perhaps not told why he couldn’t eat from that particular tree, but he was told what would happen to him if he did.

What is obvious, however, is that God and the man he had made, had a relationship, a personal acquaintance shaped by communication, and that this relationship was ordered, that is, it reflected the nature of the two parties: God the creator and law-giver; man the creature and servant. We have various aspects of this relationship on display here at the beginning. We have God making man something special, making a special place for him to live, speaking to him, giving him work to do, and placing him under orders. We have man obeying and serving as he

was told to do. There is a moral character to this relationship, a proper respect, obedience, and love.

Here we encounter the most fundamental fact of human life without the understanding of which human life must go impossibly wrong. Man was made by God for relationship with himself. Do you appreciate the fact that no other religion or philosophy begins here! It is perhaps the deepest mystery of all: why God made man? He had lived through eternity in the perfect harmony of his own triune life. Why then begin this new thing? Why add other persons to his life? For reasons that we cannot begin to fathom, at least in part it seems that God wanted friends; not out of need, of course, but out of the overflowing largeness of his heart. He was giving *his* life to others.

And in those halcyon days before the Fall, that relationship between God and man was something impossibly fine. In his life with God and before God man found *dignity* -- as he was given important work to do -- *delight* -- as he enjoyed the wonderful things that God had made and his own powers of creativity and control -- *satisfaction* -- as he saw and then enjoyed the fruit of his labors -- and *love* -- as he found himself drawn first to God in admiration and affection and then to the wife God gave him.

The Fall corrupted all of this terribly, of course, alienated God from man and turned those happy relationships into contests of wills. But still today everywhere we look and all the time we find the evidence that man was made for God and for relationship with God. All the great religions bear their witness to this truth, but so do the secular faiths of the modern world. Man is always seeking the transcendent, that beyond and above himself, that something higher that would make sense of and give purpose to his life. But here, in Genesis 2, we see the nature of man as made for relationship with God in its pristine clarity.

And everywhere we look we also see the evidence that man's only hope is to be restored to that relationship with God for which he was made. Man was not made to be his own God but to serve the living God. When man worships man bad things, not good things result. Man was not made to find his own way, but to follow the way God had showed him. When man is his own law giver he becomes an enemy of himself and of every other man. Man was not made to live and die alone, but in the fellowship of his Maker and his fellows. And all of that continues to be, however misunderstood, the longing of every human being: to live in love, to serve higher purposes, and to conquer the grave, and all of it in the fellowship of others. This was Augustine's brilliant insight when he famously wrote in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*: "...you have made us for yourself, [O Lord,] and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

In the modern world we speak of "relationships." The Bible speaks of a "covenant," the term of art for an important but ordered relationship in the ancient near east. Now to be sure, the word "covenant" is not found here. But the thing is very definitely here. To begin with you have two persons and they have a relationship to one another. They related to one another through communication. That is fundamental. The divine initiative which is a feature of all the covenants that God makes with man in Holy Scripture is certainly found here. God *places Adam* in a relationship with himself. It's not as though Adam went seeking for this; God created him for this and created the relationship with him. There are conditions attached, as there are in every covenant, in every relationship whether they are stated or not. Every relationship you have has

conditions attached in one way or another. Here we read the the commands that God gives to man in vv. 15-17. There was probably a good bit more in the way of instruction for life given to man. We may assume, for example, from 2:3 that man would have worked six days and set apart the seventh for rest and worship. No doubt as well the moral law that the Bible says is written on the hearts of all men was written on Adam's heart as well and he would have understood what was written there far better than most of us do.

There is as well threatened punishment for disobedience (a feature of all biblical covenants and of all relationships to one degree or another) and there is an implied reward for obedience. What else does the Tree of Life represent but the promise of life worthy to be called life: life to its top and life forever? That is the sense of the word "life" here. It is literally "Tree of Lifes." This is what in Hebrew grammar is called the plural of majesty or eminence, a way of saying that this life is life with a capital "L." The Bible itself seems to speak of this relationship between God and man in Eden as a covenant for these obvious reasons. The trees are the signs of the covenant, as the rainbow, Passover, circumcision, baptism, and the Lord's Supper would be signs of later iterations of the covenant God made with his people. And, like those other signs, they represent the promise of the covenant: either life with a capital "L" or death with a capital "D."

In other words, in these opening verses of chapter 2, in this snapshot of the creation and the first days of the life of man, we have the unique and exalted nature of his life -- made to be a partner of God -- the dignity, importance, and satisfaction of it, *and* the hope and promise of it, life in its fullness, life as every human being knows life ought to be and could be. In other words, in these opening verses of chapter 2 we find the explanation for human life as we encounter it first in ourselves and then in the life of everybody else.

You cannot remember this often enough and we forget it all the time. *You were made for fellowship with God.* You were made to know him, to serve him, and to find your fulfillment, your satisfaction in that knowledge and service. You have been made for a life more wonderful than you can now imagine, with your perspective so diminished by sin, your desires and affections so warped by it, and your horizons so limited by it.

But man in the Garden of Eden is what you long to be, it is that life that we all want to experience, the life we have had anticipations of but never yet closed our hand around. *The rest of the Bible tells us how it is possible for you to get back there, to a perfect friendship with God, to the satisfaction of being loved by God, of loving and serving him in important ways, and loving others as well.* There is universality to the Bible's teaching about man. It explains why we long for the things we do, all human beings, why we keep looking for them even in the teeth of constant disappointment, *and* supremely it shows us where we or any other human being can find what we are looking and longing for! Adam, the first man, soon to be followed by his wife, had this life at first, this life with God and for God, this fulfilling, wonderful life.

But since the entrance of sin, for human beings to find their way back to this life required a still greater work of God than the creation itself, the making of atonement and the conquest of death by God the Son, Jesus Christ. And even then it requires a great deal of those who seek it through faith in Christ. But the destination, a Garden of Eden and, still more, an Eden that cannot be lost, is worth the effort, whatever that effort may be! Don't you fail to find your way to this beautiful

garden and the life that human beings were made to live there. No matter what, don't fail to find your way there, even if the journey proves very difficult. Take comfort from this. You will not make the journey alone. There are a great many men and women who have set out for that Garden and its Tree of Life -- of course there would be, human beings all having been made for that Garden and having the longing for it in their hearts -- of course there would be many -- and they will help you and they will comfort you along the way.

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
 From morn to night my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?  
 A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
 May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
 You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
 Those who have gone before.  
 Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
 They will not keep you standing at the door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
 Of labour you shall find the sum.  
 Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
 Yes, beds for all who come. [Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)]