



THE GOD OF CREATION

SERIES: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Catalog No. 992

Genesis 1:1-28

First Message

Gary Vanderet

February 12, 1995

Genesis is the book of beginnings. That is what the word “genesis” means. The first book in the Old Testament tells the story of the beginning of God’s plan to bring salvation to the world. Salvation is what the Scriptures are all about. In our modern world, however, people wonder whether God has a plan to bring salvation. Things appear to be helter skelter and meaningless. People ask, Does God know what is going on? And if he does, how can he be said to be in control?

Even Christians become anxious about the direction of history. There is a limerick that expresses how we feel at times:

The world had a hopeful beginning,
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We trust that the story
Will end to God’s glory,
But at present the other side’s winning.

But Scripture tells us differently. Scripture records the activity of God in and through history, not only in the nation of Israel, but in the entire world. The book of Genesis in particular provides the foundation for the history and theology of the entire Bible. This book introduces the Creator God, and the beginnings of life, family, worship, salvation, sin and judgment.

Before we look at the text, I would like to make some introductory comments about the purpose of Scripture in general and the Book of Genesis in particular. The purpose of Scripture is not to teach about history or astronomy or geology or botany (although when the Bible touches upon these matters we can expect it to be accurate). The Scriptures leave a lot of questions unanswered, because the purpose of the Bible, as the apostle Paul puts it, is to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15). Or, putting it another way, Paul says in 1 Timothy that the goal of his teaching is to make us into more loving people (1 Tim 1:5)—people who are easy to be around. That ought always to be our goal as we study Scripture.

While we can expect the Book of Genesis to be accurate when it touches on scientific matters, it is not a science textbook. We do not know how long are the days of Genesis 1. We do not know when creation occurred; Scripture does not record that. That is because the purpose of Scripture is not to explain creation, but to catch us up in its wonder. Moses, the author of Genesis, is not concerned with how God accomplished creation. Moses would not be much interested in our modern debates about the time scale of evolution or the physics of the

First Three Minutes. When we bring such questions to the text we are disappointed, because the Bible is silent on these matters.

Although the term agnosticism bothers some Christians, there is a healthy kind of agnosticism that we can have about certain things in Scripture. The word agnostic means “not knowing.” And there are many things we do not know. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that we “know in part” (1 Cor 13:9). Therefore we ought to be uneasy with people who say they know everything. But in the critical issues of life, those matters that have to do with salvation and how to live as God’s people, the Scriptures speak with clarity. These are the things we want to learn from Genesis.

Genesis 1 and 2 are parallel accounts of creation. They are not contradictory as some imagine; they complement one another. The purpose of both accounts is to reveal how important man is in God’s sight. God loves us. We are his most important creation. Genesis 1 teaches that chronologically, because man is the last of God’s creation. Chapter 2 teaches that same fact logically, because everything is created for man.

Chapter 1 can be divided into two units of thought. The first two verses are a prologue to the creation story. The creation account begins with verse 3 and continues through 2:4. (The chapter division is in the wrong place; the creation account actually runs into chapter 2.) Notice how verse 1 begins: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”; then 2:4 concludes, “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.”

We will begin by looking at the prologue:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. (Gen 1:1-2, NASB)

The first verse is a summary statement of creation; the second verse is a description of the conditions that made that creation necessary. The point of the first verse is that God created everything. The Hebrews did not have a word for “universe.” They expressed that idea in terms of opposites. Describing a diverse group of people, we might say that both rich and poor were present. We would not necessarily mean that only rich people and poor people were present, but that people from all different economic levels were there. That is

what Moses is doing here. The point he is making is that God created the universe. More than thirty-five times in this chapter the writer says that it was God who created everything.

The word that is translated “create” means “to make something new”— something that never existed before. We say this of someone who is creative, who does things that have not been done before. This describes the God of creation. He is always doing fresh, exciting, innovative things. There is nothing boring about God. If you are bored with the things of God, then you do not understand the character of God. Now we can be creative in areas where Scripture has not spoken, because we are related to a God who is always fresh and unpredictable in what he does. In fact, the only thing that is predictable about God is his unpredictability. We cannot creatively murder or lie, because these things are fixed. But where Scripture does not speak we can be wonderfully creative, because we are related to a creative God.

The point of this story is that God created something fresh and new for man. In this account we see a pattern: God speaks and something happens; then God evaluates it and pronounces it “good.” The word “good” in Hebrew does service for many words. “Good” actually means beautiful. When Moses was born he was described as “good.” That does not mean that he slept through the night; it means he was a beautiful child. This seems to be what Moses is saying about creation. God speaks, something comes into being, and God says, “That is beautiful. Man will like that.” Everything that God created was designed for man.

That is what we are told in the first verse: In the beginning God created. He made everything new. This is in stark contrast to what everyone else was saying at that time. The first five books of the Bible are set against the background of the land of Canaan, which the people of Israel were about to enter. In Genesis, Moses is preparing them for what they would find there. They would discover, for example, that the Canaanites had their own account of creation. The Canaanites explained creation in terms of a cosmic soup, a mass that existed before the gods, out of which the gods were born. Their gods were not sovereign over creation. They themselves were the product of chaos. But what is unique about the book of Genesis is that Moses holds that God is sovereign over his creation. He is not controlled by anything or anyone. God rules: That is the point of verse 1.

Verse 2 relates the conditions that made creation necessary.

And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.

The earth is described first, as “formless and void.” In Hebrew, this phrase sounds like our descriptions “helter-skelter” or “hodge-podge.” The Hebrew words are “tohu vabohu.” They mean that everything was a mess;

everything was chaotic, ruined, wasted. There needed to be order, structure and purpose put back into the world. It was *tohu*, without form (it had no shape), and it was *bohu*, empty (it was unpopulated).

Furthermore, it was dark. That would have frightened ancient man. That was when burglars and bad people came out. At darkness, the city gates were locked. One did not go out in the dark. (Revelation 21 says that in God’s new city, in the new heavens and earth, the gates of the city are never closed, because there is no night there.) Ancient man feared the darkness. The picture evoked here would arouse in him a feeling of terror. The world was dark and chaotic.

And it was watery. The entire globe was enveloped by what is described as “the deep.” And the Spirit of God was “moving over the surface of the waters.” Ancient man was afraid of the sea. He did not venture out onto the high seas. So the picture that is evoked in verse 2 is a frightening one.

In this setting God began to work, to create, setting right the conditions that created the chaos. And the point of Genesis 1 is to remind us that the God of creation is the God of history. He is a Savior. He is a God who brings order out of chaos, and light out of darkness. God is sovereign. He is in control. We may feel that our lives are a “tohu vabohu.” Our marriages, our family circumstances, our jobs, may need light. But God is in control. He is a Savior.

Throughout the process of creation we notice a distinct pattern in the way that God works. We delight in patterns. As children we make patterns in the sand. We look for patterns in the stars. We delight in snowflakes, in series of numbers, in wallpaper patterns. When I was a child I spent hours looking at beautiful patterns and colors through a kaleidoscope. Science exists because of patterns. Notice that there is an order, a pattern, to God’s creative acts. In the first three days God forms the earth; in the second three days he fills it. So days one through three parallel days four through six. On day one God creates light, and on day four he creates the light bearers. On the second day he creates the sky, and on the fifth day he creates the birds to fill the sky, and the fish to fill the sea. On the third day he creates the dry ground, on the sixth day the animals, and finally man, to fill the earth.

Verse 3:

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (1:3-5)

So God speaks, and light comes into being; the darkness is dispelled. God has resolved the first problem. Moses does not try to explain what we know today about the division between light and darkness, that

they result from the rotation of the earth and the motion of the planets around the sun. This would mean nothing to ancient man. So Moses explains in simple terms that God did it. God made a separation between the night and the day. When the sun rose in the morning, ancient man would say, "God did that." The point is that when the sun went down in the evening and darkness fell, God was still in control.

The Canaanites had a story that is related to God's activity on the first day. They believed that El, who was their high god, cooked a lamb in its mother's milk. (That practice is prohibited in the law of Israel [Exod 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21] because it was a custom of an ancient fertility cult to guarantee fertility in the land.) Afterwards, El proceeded along the seashore and found two young human women. He assaulted them, and they gave birth to two gods, Shakker and Shallom, dawn and dusk. That is how light and darkness came into being, according to the Canaanites. But Moses says that this was not how it happened. Light was created through the action of God. He is the one responsible for light.

Verse 6:

Then God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse, and separated the waters which were below the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse; and it was so. And God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. (1:6-8)

It appears that the earth was enveloped in water. And over the water lay a mist. The first thing God did was make the sky. He chased the clouds away. Now there was a separation between the waters under the expanse or the sky and the waters up in the sky. God was beginning to solve the problem of the lack of form. On the first day he dispelled darkness, but the earth was still formless. So he made a division, and at last there was some form to the earth.

But notice that on the second day God did not say that it is good, because he was not finished.

Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. And God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good. (1:9-10)

Next, God creates the continents, the land masses, by drawing them up out of the water, which covered two thirds of the world. So now there is a sky; there is some form to the waters; there is water in the clouds and water under the sky; and land masses are emerging out of the water. The Canaanites had their own version of how these land masses were formed. They believed that the god Baal engaged in mortal combat with Yam, the Canaanite word for sea, and with a club drove him away

so that dry ground appeared. But Moses says that God created the earth and formed it.

Verse 11:

Then God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit after their kind, with seed in them, on the earth"; and it was so. And the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit, with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day. (1:11-13)

Here God is preparing the land to populate it. He caused the land to produce the grasses and the trees, with their seeds, so that the process of reproduction is fixed by God. The Canaanites worshipped Baal, the god of fertility. They believed that in the spring Baal died, that he went down under the earth, and that was why the rains ceased. Then in October Baal was raised up again. So everything depended on Baal. Their worship centered around the drama which depicted Baal's death and resurrection. The Canaanites felt that by doing these things they insured Baal's resurrection, and thus the land would be fertile. But Moses says that it is God who produces fertility. He gave the grass and the trees that would provide for the people and their animals.

Verse 14:

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day. (1:14-19)

So light precedes the sun, moon and stars. And light outlasts these bodies. The book of Revelation says that in the new heavens and the new earth there is no need for the sun and moon, because God himself is the light. The sun, moon and stars are merely light bearers; that is the meaning of the term. They are places where God gathered the light. Moses is making the point that these heavenly bodies are not objects of worship. They are under God's control. The Canaanites worshipped the sun, moon and stars. Even today, people govern their lives by the movements of the stars. But Moses says these are mere servants to help us mark days and years. In fact, he doesn't even give them names. They are merely lights.

So the darkness is dispelled and the earth has form. But it is still empty. On the fifth day God begins to solve

that problem on earth. Verse 20:

Then God said, "Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens." And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind"; and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. (1:20-25)

So God creates the warm-blooded animals and the reptiles to inhabit the dry ground that he created on the third day. Now the earth is becoming populated.

This brings us to the apex of God's creation. Verse 26:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (1:26-28)

On the sixth day God created man. On this day also God created animal life. This explains why man resembles the other animals anatomically. Man has the same sort of muscle and bone structure as animals. Technically, man can be classified with animals. That is legitimate, up to a point. But man is more than animal. Without God's word to enlighten him, however, man fails to

understand this. That is why secular psychologists are wide of the mark. They simply cannot give good counsel because they try to explain man merely as an animal. But man is created in the image of God. Next week, we will talk more about the creation of man, but let us simply say here that on a scale of one to ten, if God is a ten and the animals are a one, man is much closer to an eight or nine. Man is created in the image of God.

When Moses wrote this text, people had no concept of one God in control of all of nature. They believed that all of nature was god, that there were gods everywhere. There is no neuter gender in any of the Ancient Near Eastern languages. Unlike English, there is no "it" in them. The reason for that is that there is nothing that could be called "it." Everything had personality and life. The rocks were god. The clouds were Baal. The sky was Enu. The sun was Sheppish. The stars had names. They were gods. Even death was a god. The people had no control over their environment. If a child fell in a river and was swept away, it was the god of the river who took the child. So people lived in constant fear, because they had no control over any part of their lives. Moses wrote to say that it was not so. God rules.

And God is a Savior. Our ability to rule derives from our relationship to him. We can rule only when we are being ruled. The extent to which we allow God to master our lives is the extent to which we can master our environment. The world tries to control us and manipulate us. The message is that if we buy whatever is being produced this year, whatever goes faster or looks better, then we will be able to attract the opposite sex. But the answer to life is not found in something we buy or wear or spray on or drive. The Creator God of history is also a Savior. He wants to enter your *tohu vabohu* and dispel the darkness by giving you his word. This is the Word that the apostle John says "became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The same God who spoke creation into existence desires to bring life into our existence. That is the promise he makes today to those who belong to him.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino