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Genesis 1:1–2:3

First Message

Bernard Bell

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THIS IS MY FATHER'S WORLD

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

My formal studies as an undergraduate were in Geography, but I also spent much time pursuing a less formal curriculum on my own, studying the Bible and leading Bible studies. I didn't pursue these two subjects in isolation one from the other. Instead I tried to reconcile my Geography studies and my Biblical studies. If you understand Geography as being merely the rote memorization of a list of countries and capitals, then there is not much to reconcile. But Geography is the study of anything to do with the earth's surface and the activities that take place thereupon. The early chapters of Genesis therefore have rather a lot to say about Geography: the creation of the earth, the planting of a garden, the birth of economic activity, the first city, a Flood, the spread of mankind, and so on. I was fascinated by these first chapters of the Bible. I read books about the intersection of creation and science, books such as *The Genesis Flood* by John Whitcomb and Henry Morris, then regarded as a classic of the creation scientist cause. I joined the Biblical Creation Society in the UK. In my assignments I argued for what I considered to be a Biblical view of the origins of the earth.

Looking back on those years now, I realize that I was approaching Genesis scientifically; that is, I considered that these early chapters of Genesis had things to say about science. In effect, I treated Genesis as a scientific textbook. The books I read taught me how to read Genesis scientifically, but I now realize that no one taught me how to read it theologically—that is, to read it as a record of who God is, who man is, and how the two relate. In the eighteen years since graduation my understanding of Genesis has changed a great deal. It is not that I have conceded defeat to the evolutionists—my views about science have changed very little. But I have come to think that Genesis has very little to say about science and very much to say about theology. Instead of reading Genesis scientifically I now read it theologically. This is why, when two years ago I taught a Monday night class on the early chapters of Genesis, I entitled the class not “Genesis 1–12” but “The theology of Genesis 1–12.” I wanted to emphasize the fact that Genesis is to be read theologically.

I. Learning to read theologically

Three things have helped me make the transition from reading Genesis scientifically to reading it theologically.

1. Reading as literature

Firstly, I have learnt the importance of literary structure. For most of the Twentieth Century it has been commonplace to consider the OT as the error-filled product of unsophisticated editors. So for example, the first two chapters of Genesis were viewed as containing two contradictory accounts of creation. The Hebrew editor who put these chapters together thousands of years ago was obviously not very bright, otherwise he would have realized how contradictory the two accounts were. But the modern scholar, being a very clever fellow, can see right through it all and unravel the chapters, indeed the whole Pentateuch, into separate color-coded strands. But in the

past twenty years there has been a great change, thanks largely to the attention of professors of literature. When these literature scholars looked at the Bible, they were amazed at the literary sophistication of the writers and editors. The arrogance of several generations of scholars has been replaced by a measure of humility. The Bible is very carefully written. Anyone who attempts to interpret the Bible without understanding its structure runs the risk of arriving at a wrong understanding. Each book of the OT has a literary structure, and this is especially true of Genesis.

2. Reading the Bible as a whole

Secondly, I have learnt the importance of reading Genesis, or any other book of the Bible, in the light of the whole of Scripture. The Bible is like a mystery novel. In a well-written mystery the reader doesn't learn “whodunit” until the last page of the book, but then he realizes that everything written in the rest of the book leads up to that final page. The seemingly insignificant details turn out to be not insignificant at all. So it is with the Bible. Everything leads up to the end of the story, which we are given in Revelation 21–22. Therefore, I don't read Genesis in a vacuum. I read it in the light of the rest of the story, and especially in the light of the end of the story.

3. Reading symbolically

Thirdly, I have learnt to read and think symbolically. A few months ago I heard on NPR an interview with a mathematics professor from St. Mary's College. He was asked why students who breeze through algebra, geometry and trigonometry have such a hard time when they hit calculus. His reply fascinated me: people have difficulty understanding calculus because of a failure to think symbolically. When I heard that I immediately thought that this is true also of the Bible. A symbol is “something that stands for or represents another thing; esp., an object used to represent something abstract” (Webster's). People tend to get rather uncomfortable when I talk of reading the Bible symbolically. They assume that I am robbing things of any literal reality. But take the case of the Land. The land that God gave Israel was a physical reality, but if you see the land as only a piece of real estate you completely miss the point of what the land was all about. Ultimately, the land was a symbol, referring to a greater reality. It is the failure to understand this that leads to much confusion over the land occupied by the current state of Israel. Or take the example of the Temple. Look at the verse on the cover of your bulletin:

“Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool.

Where is the house you will build for me?

Where will my resting place be?

Has not my hand made all these things,
and so they came into being?”

declares the LORD. (Isa 66:1-2)

The Temple was a real physical building but it was also a symbol pointing to a greater reality, for a mere physical building can never

be a sufficient temple for the Lord. It is when we see the Temple as a symbol that we can understand the absence of a Temple in the new heavens and the new earth. The symbol has given way to the reality toward which the symbol always pointed.

To understand any portion of Scripture, therefore, we need to pay attention to its literary structure, to the rest of the story, and to the meaning of symbols. With these three points in mind, let us embark on a theological reading of the first chapter of Genesis.

II. A Theological Reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3

1. Structure

Genesis is a carefully-written and highly-structured book. The book is divided into sections by the heading, occurring ten times, “This is the account of...” (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2). The first of these headings does not occur until 2:4, setting the first chapter apart from the rest of the book. Genesis 1 functions as an introduction to Genesis, indeed to the whole Bible.

The unique nature of chapter 1 is also indicated by the language. Though written in prose, the language is highly structured and patterned. The six days are described using repetitive language. The first two verses stand outside this structure as a heading. The first three verses of chapter 2 are an epilogue.

2. The Initial State (1:1-2)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (1:1-2 NIV)

The Bible opens abruptly with the statement, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The Bible makes no attempt to prove the existence of God. We are presented with his existence as a fact. In verse 2 we are presented with an earth that is already in existence. We are not told how it came into being, although its existence is covered under the general statement of verse 1, as being created by God. Much though we might like to prove the existence of God and argue about how the earth itself was created, the Bible gives us nothing to go on. We must learn to be content with a large measure of ignorance, for the Lord has left much mystery in this world.

Verse 2 describes the state of the earth before the six days of creation. We are told three things. Firstly, the earth was formless and empty. In Hebrew this is the delightful-sounding *tohu va-vohu*. The earth was both uninhabitable, because it had no form, and uninhabited, because it was empty. Secondly, the earth was covered by darkness and the deep. This reinforces the idea that the earth was a blank slate, devoid of form and content. Thirdly, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. God through his Spirit was actively present upon an otherwise still and inactive world, ready to be the executor of God’s command.

3. Forming and Filling (1:3-5)

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

Over this shapeless and empty blob called “earth,” covered by darkness and sea, God speaks. God effortlessly calls all things into being through his word. His word is put into effect by the Spirit,

and, as we learn from the NT, by the Son. The six days of creation are carefully ordered into two sets of three days. In the first three days God counteracts the formlessness of the blank earth, giving it form, shape and order. A key word here is the verb “divide” or “separate,” used five times. On the first day he creates light, dividing the light from the darkness, the day from the night. On the second day he creates a firmament (NASB) or expanse (NIV), dividing the waters above from the waters below, the sky from the sea. On the third day he creates dry land, dividing the land from the sea. By the end of the third day we have a formed earth. It has structure and shape. But it is still empty.

In the second set of three days, days 4-6, God counteracts this emptiness, filling the realms that he formed on the first three days. On the first day he formed the day and the night; on the fourth day he fills these two realms with their respective created entities, the sun, moon and stars. On the second day he formed the sky and the sea; on the fifth day he fills these realms with their respective creatures, birds and fish. On the third day he created the dry land with its vegetation; on the sixth day he fills this realm with its appropriate creatures, the animals. Everything is carefully ordered with each creature in its appropriate realm. The repetitive language reinforces this careful ordering.

The last creature created is man.

4. Man (1:26-30)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

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

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

The events of the first five and a half days have followed a pattern. And so, when we reach verse 26 we expect to read, “Then God said, ‘Let the land produce man according to his kind.’” But the pattern is broken. This is where it is so important to pay attention to literary structure, because this literary method places great emphasis on the event that breaks the pattern. The pattern is broken in numerous ways.

Firstly, each other act of creation is announced with the divine fiat—the declaration, “Let there be.” But the creation of man is introduced with a statement of divine deliberation, “Let us make.” However we interpret the plurality here, it is clear that this new act of creation is being presented in a different category.

Secondly, a different verb is used. The verb used for God’s making of the other creatures is *asah*, the usual Hebrew verb for make. But for man, the verb is *bara*, used three times in v. 27. This verb is used only of God and there is never any mention of the material from

which the object is created. It is used only of new acts of creation. The creation of man is not in the same category as that of the other creatures.

Thirdly, for most of the other creatures we are told that they were created after their kind: the seed-bearing plants and the fruit-bearing trees (1:12), the sea creatures and the birds (1:21), the wild animals, the livestock, and the creepy-crawlies (1:24-25). The birds take the form of birds, and the sea creatures take the form of sea creatures. The two don't cross. As Tevye said in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "If a bird were to marry a fish, where would they live?" But when we come to the creation of man, we find a striking omission of this little phrase. God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." This can only mean that man is made not after his own kind but after God's kind. What does it mean to be in the image and likeness of God? In the Ancient Near East when a king conquered a territory and moved on, he left behind him a statue, an image, representing his rule over that domain. Man is created to be God's representative ruler over the earth. The fish fill their realm, the birds their realm, the animals their realm, but man is given dominion over all of these realms. He is commissioned by God to rule on his behalf. This does not give man license to rape the earth. If anything, man is to be an ardent environmentalist, caring for the earth that God has created but never falling into the trap of worshipping the creature rather than the creator, of exalting "Nature" with a capital N. So, man is created to be God's representative ruler on earth. But he is more than that. He is also created in the likeness of God. In some way man is actually like God. Man, therefore, is both representative and representational of God.

Fourthly, man is created as both male and female, sharing a divine-like unity in diversity.

Though man is a creature, he is far exalted above the other creatures. Man is no mere animal. Man is created according to God's kind. Luke traces his genealogy back to "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:37). With the creation of this earthly human representative of the heavenly divine, the six days of creation are complete. The blank earth has been formed and filled.

5. Verdict (1:31)

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Six times God has seen that what he has made was good. Now at the end of the sixth day he surveys the cosmos as a completed whole, and for the seventh time we are told that it was good, nay "it was very good." The Hebrew word "good" means that something is what it is supposed to be and that it functions as it should. God surveyed all that he had made, and, behold, it was what he had intended making and it was functioning the way he intended it to function. It was a harmonious whole.

We would expect the creation story to end there, but we find that there is yet another day, the seventh day.

6. The seventh day (2:1-3)

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

As I said in my sermon on the Sabbath a year ago, for someone who is supposed to be at rest God had a busy day on that seventh day.¹ Four verbs are predicated of him: he finished his work, he

rested, he blessed that seventh day, and he sanctified it. Many have trouble with the idea of God working on the first sabbath, so, in order to help him out, they move some of his work to the sixth day. Both NASB and NIV state that it was "by the seventh day" that God completed his work, meaning that he finished it late on the sixth day. The Revised English Bible is even more explicit: "On the sixth day God completed." But the Hebrew text is very clear: it was on the seventh day, not the sixth day, that God completed his work. On the seventh day he brought his creation into a state of being complete. Then God did something very special to that seventh day, something that he did not do to any of the other days. He both blessed the day and he sanctified it. By blessing the day God endowed it with the potential to be the day he intended it to be. If "good" is the declaration that something is what it is intended to be, "bless" is the endowment of the wherewithal to continue in a state of goodness. Then God went a stage further and he sanctified the day. To sanctify means to make holy. Holiness is fundamental to the biblical view of the world. The cosmos is divided into two realms, the common and the uncommon, the profane and the holy. To sanctify something is to set it aside as "other." On the seventh day God moved a portion of his creation into a different realm, the realm of the other.

III. Implications

I wish to draw out three profound implications of this story, implications that affect how we view the whole story of redemption.

1. God is redeeming his whole world

This is the world that God has made. As we sang earlier, "This is my Father's world." He spoke it into existence with his word, carefully forming the cosmos and filling it. He put each creature in its appropriate place. At the end of the sixth day he saw that everything that he had made, the whole cosmos as a harmoniously functioning whole, was very good. Though creation has been marred by the fall and by the effects of the fall, God still cares for this creation that he has made. He ensures that this earth continues to function. He will ensure that this, his earth, continues to function until he has accomplished his plan of salvation, $\gamma 2K$ notwithstanding.

Too many Christians think that redemption is just a neat legal trick whereby God lets us off the hook for our sins. But redemption is about very much more than the forgiveness of sins. Redemption is a full and complete restoration of all things. Paul wrote the Romans that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom 8:22). The whole creation awaits its redemption. The popular image of heaven is of cherubs, harps and clouds. No wonder it seems boring to most people. Fortunately, this image has nothing to do with Biblical reality. According to the Bible, at the end of redemption lie a new heavens and a new earth. God's plan of redemption concerns the whole cosmos. He has seated Christ at his right hand and is in the process of bringing his entire cosmos under the rule of Christ.

The church has always had an uncomfortable relationship with the earth. Jesus' disciples were earthy men who wrestled their livelihood from the land and the sea. But within just a few generations the church was beset by neoplatonism, the resurgence of certain ideas of Plato. One of the distinctives of neoplatonism was to regard matter as evil and spirit as good. The first monks, influenced by these platonic ideas, forsook the world to live in desert caves, mortifying their evil bodies. They longed for the day when their soul would be set free from the confines of their body. But this longing for a disem-

bodied soul is much closer to Buddhism than to Biblical Christianity. The Bible teaches us to expect a resurrection of the body not its annihilation.

Today we are beset by another variation of the neoplatonic belittling of the body. Many Christians think that since the world is headed to hell in a handbasket, we ought to distance ourselves from the world. We ought not to waste time on culture or art or caring for the earth. But this continues to be God's world, however much Satan may be its present ruler. The recognition that this is God's world was crucial to the rise of modern science. Behind the scientific pursuits of early scientists such as Isaac Newton lay the Reformation rediscovery of the sovereignty and providence of God. They sought to probe this fascinating world that God had made, confident that there were patterns to be discovered. Newton considered that he was but as a little child playing at the seashore of the vast ocean of God's creation.

This world is tainted by the effects of sin, but it is not evil. Let us never forget that God's redemptive purposes concern the whole of creation. I have no interest in being a disembodied soul.

2. God's pursuit of man

The second implication concerns mankind. Without an adequate understanding of creation we will never understand why God pursues us so. Many Christians don't even understand that it is God that pursues us. Modern evangelicalism usually fosters the impression that we have to pursue God. But as Augustine discovered long ago we are able to pursue God only because he first pursues us. Redemption does not depend upon us. It depends upon God. He created man to be his faithful image and likeness. He is determined to restore fallen man to being his faithful image and likeness. God created us for glory and he is not going to abandon that intent.

3. Eschatology

The third implication concerns eschatology. This fancy word means the study of last things, from the Greek word *eschatos*, meaning last. Most Christians, if they understand the term at all, associate eschatology with the last book of the Bible, Revelation, with Armageddon, the Millennium, and now $\Upsilon 2\kappa$. But eschatology starts in the creation story of the first book. Much faulty thinking about the eschatology of Revelation has arisen from a failure to grasp the eschatology of Genesis. We have seen that the formed and filled cosmos that God made was very good. But beyond the very good lies another realm: beyond the good lies the holy. When God transferred the seventh day into the realm of the holy, that left six days in the realm of the common, outside the holy. Surely this, though good, is less than perfect. Would God be content leaving such a large portion of his cosmos outside the holy?

Holiness is a major theme through the rest of the Bible. Redemption is not merely the restoration of holiness to things that were holy before the Fall. It is the extension of holiness to realms that have not been holy before, of the transfer of these portions of the cosmos into the realm of the holy. The whole nation of Israel is set aside as holy. The land of Israel is set aside as holy, with the Holy of Holies being the most holy. Where is all this leading? God is intent on drawing all things into the realm of the holy. One of the ways this is presented is using the symbolism of light and land. The blank state of the unformed earth was characterized as darkness and sea. Into the darkness God spoke light, driving the darkness back to the

periphery. Into the sea he spoke dry land, driving the sea back to the periphery. Darkness and sea, though being real, tangible things, also have symbolic meaning in the Bible, serving as symbols of that which is chaotic. Into the disorder of the primeval state God spoke order. At the end of Revelation we find that the new cosmos will contain neither darkness nor sea. I take this to mean that all will be rendered holy.

We live betwixt times, in a cosmos that contains both light and darkness, both dry land and sea. Even had there been no Fall there would have been further activity necessary on the part of God, eliminating the darkness and the sea, transferring the first six days into the realm of the holy. The Fall necessitated a recovery operation. But it is more than a recovery operation. God is doing far more than restoring the world to a mixture of light and darkness, of land and sea. He will both restore creation and fulfill it. The end will be far better than the beginning. Indeed, the last two chapters of Revelation describe not the end, but the end of the beginning, for it is only with the new cosmos of Revelation 21–22 that we attain to the cosmos that God always intended. That's when life will really begin. Meanwhile though, God has spoken his light into the darkness of our hearts, has spoken order into our disordered beings. He is re-forming and re-filling us so that we be fit for that new heavens and new earth.

This is eschatology. What usually passes for eschatology is a travesty of the Biblical concept. Even if there were to be a conflict at Armageddon and a millennium, and I am by no means convinced of that, these are not the last things. These are merely conjectured penultimate things. But so much attention is focused on them that people lose sight of the truly last things. Forget the books on Armageddon. Where are the books about the new heavens and the new earth? A glorious future awaits us. The end will be far better than the beginning. It is because God is the Creator of this vast cosmos that he is able to be its Redeemer, renewing it and bringing it to its great goal of being the perpetual dwelling place of both God and man. Because he wants this new cosmos to be a dwelling place not only for himself but for us, he is relentless in his pursuit of us. Redemption is driven by God, and to him be the glory.

As we sang earlier:

This is my Father's world,
 O let me ne'er forget
 That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
 God is the Ruler yet.
 This is my Father's world:
 the battle is not done;
 Jesus who dies shall be satisfied,
 and earth and heav'n be one.

1. Bernard Bell, "Sabbath: A Token of Eternity," Catalog No. 1176, September 20, 1998.

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Genesis 2:4–3:24

Second Message

Bernard Bell

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ADAM, WHERE ARE YOU?

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

Last week we saw that God created a world that was very good. But as we look around ourselves today, we do not see a world that is very good. We see a world that is very much out of kilter. The physical world is out of kilter: within the past few weeks we've seen a devastating earthquake in Turkey, another earthquake in Greece, and most recently Hurricane Floyd, which wreaked such havoc in the Bahamas and on the east coast. Even more so in the human world do we see that all is not well on planet earth: seven shot at a church in Fort Worth; two shot at a hospital in Los Angeles; yet more bombs in Moscow; thousands killed and hundreds of thousands forced to flee in East Timor. What has happened? How has the good become the bad?

Many diagnoses are offered. Hurricanes, droughts and floods are blamed on El Niño, on La Niña, or on global warming. Catastrophes in the human arena are blamed on excessive government or on insufficient government, on over-indulgent welfare or on insufficient welfare, on proliferation of guns or on gun control, on arms sales to governments or on arms sales to rebels. The bloodshed in Timor is blamed on the island being united when it should be divided, but bloodshed in Ireland is blamed on that island being divided when it should be united. There is tremendous confusion about what is wrong and why it is wrong. Amidst all the babble of the experts I find that one diagnosis continues to ring clear, that provided by Genesis 3. This chapter still provides the only adequate explanation of the wrong that we see around us. Genesis 3 gives us an account of the first act of sin by the first humans, of the consequences of that sin for the humans, and of God's response to this first act of rebellion. But I want to start our analysis of this event with a look at Genesis 2 which describes the setting in which that sin took place.

We saw last week that Genesis is divided into an introduction (1:1–2:3) plus ten major sections by the repeated heading that begins "The account of..." The first of these sections is 2:4–4:26. These three chapters are to be read together. Chapter 2 describes the environment within which the events of chapter 3 took place. This is an important point for it runs counter to much of the accepted wisdom of the world. Current wisdom says that if only you provide man with a good environment he will behave himself. Man's misdemeanors are not to be labeled sin, and are certainly not to be blamed on anything wrong with man, but on the inadequacy of his environment. This may be politically correct, but it is not Biblically correct. Genesis 2–3 show us that the first sin was committed in the very best environment on earth.

Chapter one showed how God carefully formed and filled this earth to be a suitable habitation for his creatures. He made the birds to live in the sky, the fish to live in the sea, the animals to live on the land. But where is man to live? We are told that man

is to rule over the birds that live in the sky, over the fish that live in the sea, and over the animals that live on the land, but we are not told where man himself is to live. This is what chapter 2 tells us. Imagine chapters 1-2 as a movie. In chapter one the camera is positioned 100,000 miles out in space so that the earth fills the screen. We watch as a formless empty ball is formed and filled. In chapter 2 the camera zooms in to look at a particular place on earth, and we are shown God crafting a suitable home for man, his earthly representative.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (Gen 2:4-9 NIV)

"The LORD God planted a garden." How the word "garden" fills us with delight. The busier and more dislocated we get the more we seem to long for a garden. But at the same time we build ever larger houses on ever smaller lots. We have no room for gardens, and if we do we have no time to look after them. But that doesn't stop our yearning for them. The mere mention of the word is enough to evoke a longing in us. Six weeks ago, Sue and I moved into our first house. It is a small house on a large lot, with a lovely garden. We love sitting outside, and working in the garden. It's an oasis within the urban jungle of Silicon Valley.

The habitation that God designed for man was a garden. The Hebrew word for garden is *gan*; one of our wineries here in California is called Gan Eden, Garden of Eden. This word *gan* originally denoted a place that was enclosed, protected. It was, quite literally, paradise, for our word "paradise" derives from an Ancient Near Eastern word made up of two components, *pairi* "around" and *daeza* "wall." You might be thinking of the enclosed garden described in the book and movie, *The Secret Garden*. But the Ancient Near Eastern imagery is of a royal hunting preserve. Common also in medieval Europe, a few of these still survive there, such as Fontainebleau outside Paris. The garden of Genesis

2 is planted by God himself. Ezekiel 28:13 describes it as “the garden of God.” It is God’s sanctuary on earth. It is planted in Eden, which means Delight. Elsewhere it is called the holy mountain of God (Ezek 28:14). In symbolic terms this garden was the cosmic mountain, the meeting place of heaven and earth.

The sanctuary imagery is continued in 2:10-14. From this garden flows a river, dividing into four streams. This is the river of life, flowing from God’s sanctuary to fructify all the surrounding land.

Where did God want man to live? In paradise, in God’s garden, on the holy mount of God, in God’s own sanctuary on earth. God places Adam in this sanctuary and gives him a job description:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “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.” (2:15-17)

Adam has already been commissioned to be a king, ruling God’s kingdom on his behalf. Now he is commissioned to be a priest, faithfully serving God in his garden. As God’s gardener he is to work the garden and to guard it. And then he is to party, to feast abundantly in God’s presence. God had filled the garden with a great variety of trees, all of them pleasing to the eye and good for food. God does not say, “If you get really hungry it’s OK to eat one or two fruit, but make sure you don’t take too many. These are my trees and my fruit.” No, he tells Adam to take all he wants. In Hebrew, God is quite emphatic that Adam is to eat of these trees. But God does impose a single limit: there is one tree that is off limits, and God is equally emphatic that Adam will die if he eats of that tree.

God provides the man with a woman to be his companion and helper. The chapter closes with the two of them in blissful happiness, at peace with one another, with God, and with the world. But trouble is lurking in the trees. This bliss and peace is about to be shattered.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. 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 surely 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. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (3:1-7)

In 3:1 we encounter a snake. We are told nothing about the origins of this snake other than that it was created by God. Again the Bible is silent on matters which we would like to know a lot about. I do agree with those who believe that Satan was working in or through this snake. The Bible says little about Satan, about his origins, about his Fall; it tells us much less than some people want to make the Bible say about him. I think that one of the reasons that Scripture is relatively silent on Satan is to prevent us falling into a belief that is common to man-made religion, the belief in two equal and opposite gods, a god of good and a god of bad. Focus enough attention on Satan and you run that danger. Satan is not an equal and opposite force to God. God is sovereign, Satan is not. So Scripture focuses our attention on God. Suffice it for the moment to say that Satan was probably an archangel, one of the chief angels, who grasped after equality with God and was thrown out of heaven. Ever since he has been implacably opposed to God’s purposes.

The snake proceeds to speak. As Don Francisco wrote in the song Pat sang for us earlier, “The master of deception now begins with his dissection of the word.” God had given his word to Adam. It was a simple command, easily obeyed. It involved little hardship because the garden was filled with thousands of trees, and Adam had been told to eat as much as he liked from any of them except one. The snake, or Satan, dissects God’s word in three stages.

The serpent begins his attack by questioning the veracity of God’s word, “Did God really say...?” The woman responds by repeating God’s command, showing that Adam has instructed her concerning the command. The serpent then intensifies his attack. From merely casting doubt on God’s word, he now outright contradicts it: “you will not surely die.” Then he goes a step further, telling the woman that God is a spoil-sport: “He doesn’t want you to eat the fruit because he doesn’t want you to be like him.”

Let’s take a step back and see what the serpent, and ultimately Satan, are doing here. God has placed man in paradise, the best place on earth. Here he has provided him with tremendous bounty and with the freedom to enjoy all that God has given him. It is all very good: thousands of things are permitted, and only one thing is forbidden. But Satan focuses attention on the one thing denied. This becomes the focus of the woman’s attention till she loses sight of all else. The serpent wants her to forget that every other tree in the garden is also pleasing to the eye and good for food. Secondly, the serpent persuades the woman that she needs to have this one thing now. Thirdly, she owes it to herself to take it now in order to make herself more complete. God is denying her this one thing because he doesn’t want her to attain to her full womanhood. Fourthly, the serpent persuades the woman to evaluate the fruit through her eyes rather than through her ears. Her eyes see that the fruit is good, while her ear is closed to God’s prohibition. The serpent’s attack is so comprehensive that the woman succumbs and eats of the fruit.

What I find so scary about this is that the serpent’s methods are the same as those used today by the advertising industry. Madison Avenue wants you to forget the rich bounty you already have; there is one more thing you need, and you need it now. Moreover, you owe it to yourself to make yourself more com-

plete. You deserve it and those who might withhold it from you are spoil-sports. While reason might be telling you not to take it, Madison Avenue appeals to your sight: forget what the others are saying, just look...and take.

This is also the way that temptation works today. Satan still uses the same methods. He wants to detract us from the bounty God has given us to enjoy, and focus our attention on the one thing forbidden. When you understand this, you can plot a course of defense. Take lust for example. When Satan tries to persuade me that another woman is good, I should remind myself of the rich bounty that God has given me in my spouse.

Behind the specific act of taking and eating the fruit lay the one basic sin that has remained unchanged since the garden: the woman decided what was right in her own eyes. In doing so she ignored what God had said was right in his eyes. God wanted her to live by faith in his word; Satan wanted her to live by sight. God wanted her to abide by his decision as to what was good; Satan wanted her to exercise moral autonomy.

Does this mean that I am laying all the blame on the woman? Where was the man? He is strikingly absent from the text, but we find at the end of 3:6 that he is beside the woman. He has presumably been there all along, the archetypal passive male. But man had been commissioned to guard the garden. As guardian of God's sanctuary he should have responded immediately to a creature that misused God's words. He should have stepped in and silenced this mis-speaking animal. But the man is passive, and willingly eats of the fruit the woman passes him.

The serpent was right. When the first couple ate the fruit their eyes were opened and they became like God, knowing good and evil, as God himself acknowledges in 3:22. In making their own decision as to what was good, man set himself up as God. As sovereign Creator, God had the ability to decide what was good, but he did not give man, his creature, the ability to do likewise, to independently decide what is good. When man arrogates to himself the ability to declare what is good, he functions as God.

Satan was right in saying that man would be like God, but the couple quickly finds that this freedom is terrifying. Suddenly aware of their nakedness, they make skimpy coverings to hide their nakedness from one another. Afraid of each other, they find that they are also afraid of God:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (3:8-13)

In their fear, the man and the woman hide not only from themselves, but also from God. God comes after them, but they misinterpret his motives. God asked, "Where are you?" but he knew full where they were. He asked this to give the man a chance to 'fess up. But man passes the buck and blames the woman whom God provided for him. The woman blames the serpent. And so it has always been. Though we know that confession and repentance are the path to forgiveness, reconciliation and freedom, we persist in blaming others.

The man has blamed the woman, and the woman has blamed the serpent. When God gets to the end of the chain he begins to pronounce judgment, speaking to the participants in the reverse order, first the serpent, then the woman, then the man. He pronounces judgment on all three participants, though he blames only the serpent and the man. But mixed in with the words of judgment we find the dawn of redemption. The cloud of judgment is tinged with the silver lining of grace.

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

**"Cursed are you above all the livestock
and all the wild animals!**

**You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.**

**And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel." (3:14-15)**

God's judgment upon the serpent is a curse. We instinctively know that this is not a positive word, but would have difficulty defining it. The verb "curse" is the opposite of "bless" which we encountered last week. The best way I have found of explaining these words is in terms of success and failure. When God blesses someone, he ensures he will be successful. But when God curses someone, he ensures that he will be unsuccessful; he consigns that person to futility. In cursing the serpent, God consigns him to futility. God makes every effort to pursue man, but he makes no effort to pursue the serpent redemptively. Broadening the scope, we can say that God makes no effort to redeem Satan. Instead, he immediately consigns Satan to futility. This is very good news, because it means that no matter how hard Satan tries to thwart God's purposes he will ultimately be unsuccessful.

Secondly, the serpent had managed to persuade the woman that he, the serpent, was her friend and that God was the enemy. But God made mankind to be his friend not his enemy. He announces that he will redraw the boundary lines, putting enmity between the woman and the serpent, between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed. Ultimately there will be a showdown between the two seeds in which the seed of the woman will receive a severe blow but the seed of the serpent will be mortally wounded. Much of the rest of the Bible can be read as the story of these two seeds.

God turns from the serpent to address the woman and then the man:

To the woman he said,

“I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
with pain you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you.”

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food

until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;

for dust you are

and to dust you will return.” (3:16-19)

God had created man and woman for an idyllic life within the garden. But God’s judgment on them is to inflict pain and toil. Woman is subjected to pain in the home: in the bearing and raising of children, and in her marital relationship. Man is subjected to pain in his work. Henceforth he will have to struggle to make a living. No longer will he be able to pluck his food from the great bounty of God’s garden. God curses the ground, ensuring that it will not give up its food without a struggle.

But here, too, we have a silver lining. We regard pain as a great evil, but pain is also positive, and I don’t mean just in the sense, “no pain, no gain.” Paul Brand was a missionary doctor in India, specializing in the treatment of leprosy. In his books *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, *In His Image*, and *Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants*, he writes that what his leprosy patients most wanted was the ability to feel pain.¹ Leprosy attacks the body’s nervous system so that sufferers of that disease are unable to feel pain. “Hallelujah!” you might say. But the leprosy sufferers see it differently. Pain is an indication that something is wrong. Unable to feel pain, lepers damage their bodies.

Pain is a gracious gift from God. How so? God does not want us to find our ultimate fulfillment here on earth. He does not want women to find their ultimate fulfillment bearing and raising children, or in their relationship with their husbands. He does not want men to find their ultimate fulfillment in their work.

God could have wiped mankind off the face of the earth and started over again. Or he could have cursed man, consigning him to futility, to the same end that awaits Satan. But God does not curse mankind. Though he passes judgment on mankind it is a judgment laced with grace. It is grace that is much in evidence in the closing verses of the chapter.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living.

The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them. And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. (3:20-24)

God’s grace is evident in three ways in these verses: Firstly, in the continuation of life. Though death has entered the world and mankind is subject to it, God will ensure that life continues. In faith, therefore, Adam names his wife Eve, meaning “living,” because he understands that she will be the mother of all human life. Secondly, God takes away Adam and Eve’s inadequate garments and gives them new garments of his own making. Thirdly, God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden. How is this a sign of grace? God is concerned lest man live forever in a fallen, rebellious state. Man is banished from the garden and from the tree of life for his own good. But it is not an eternal banishment. God has made man for the garden and is determined to restore him to the garden. At the end of Revelation we see that man once again has access to the tree of life. But before he is given that access, God has to redeem him, has to reverse the consequences of the Fall.

Do you feel pain? Do you feel that you are toiling amidst the thorns and thistles? Does work fail to satisfy you? Does your husband fail to meet your expectations? Do your kids frustrate you? Do you lie awake in the middle of the night thinking “there has to be more to life than this”? Are you looking for “the shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land, a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way, from the burning of the noontide heat and the burden of the day”?

Good. These feelings are indications that we are not made for life wandering east of Eden. God has not made you to find your fulfillment in work or in family. He has not even made you to find your fulfillment in church work or in ministry. He’s made you to find your fulfillment in himself alone. We are made for life in the garden, in God’s sanctuary. God has made us for himself and we will be restless till we find our rest in him. The big question is, “How do we get back to the garden?” But for that, you’ll have to wait till next week. For now I’ll leave you with the question, “Adam, Where are you?”

1. Paul Brand with Philip Yancey, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), *In His Image* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), and *Pain: the Gift Nobody Wants* (HarperCollins, 1993).



Catalog No. 7157

Matthew 1:1-18

Third Message

Bernard Bell

November 21st, 1999

JESUS CHRIST, SON OF DAVID, SON OF ABRAHAM

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

Two months ago, I left you with the question, “How do we get back to the garden?” and told you that you would have to wait till the next week for the answer. But that week I flew over the handlebars of my bike, broke my elbow and landed in the hospital. Thanks to the many of you who have expressed your care and concern during these past two months. But I owe you an apology for leaving you in the wilderness for so long, with my question unanswered.

In my first message we saw that God carefully formed and filled a world that was very good. Into this world he placed man to rule as his earthly representative. In the second message we saw that God planted a garden into which he placed man. This garden was God’s sanctuary, a piece of heaven on earth. Here man was to be God’s faithful and obedient servant, enjoying God’s bounty. But man and woman took matters into their own hands, deciding and doing what was right in their own eyes, not in God’s eyes. For this act of moral autonomy, of acting as God who alone can decide what is good and evil, God expelled them from the garden, from his sanctuary.

Today I am going to attempt to present the story from then until now—thousands of years of history and 99% of the Biblical timeline. For many weeks I pondered what to use as my text. I was spoiled for choice, for I had almost the entire Scripture to choose from. I finally decided to take what may seem to you a most unlikely text—the genealogy in Matthew 1. What were you doing when that genealogy was read for us a few minutes ago? Did you nod off? Did you squirm in your seat and feel uncomfortable? Did you get indignant? We don’t know what to do with the genealogies in Scripture. Or rather, we do know what to do: we hit the fast forward button and skip right over them.

Not all cultures treat the Biblical genealogies this way, as Joanne Shetler relates in her book, *And the Word Came With Power*.¹ Joanne went to the Philippines with Wycliffe Bible Translators. When she arrived in the tribal village which was to be her home for the next many years, the village headman invited her to live with him and his family. Joanne was single, and this headman took her under his protective care. But he never showed any interest in the gospel. Joanne labored away faithfully, learning the language, teaching the people to read, and translating the Bible. The first book that she translated was Matthew’s Gospel. Shortly after Joanne had finished Matthew, the headman picked up the finished booklet and said he wanted to see the fruit of her labors. He opened the booklet to the first page and started to read. Joanne, knowing what was on that first page, urgently suggested that he skip to the next page. But it was too late. The headman had started reading chapter 1, and he was hooked. After reading the genealogy he said to Joanne, “Why did you never tell me this

was in here?” He was soon converted, and immediately wanted to take the gospel to the neighboring villages. He became an energetic and successful evangelist. He had a single evangelistic tool. With Joanne’s help he wrote out a genealogy on a long sheet of paper. When he explained the gospel he would hold up this sheet and explain the people’s genealogy, starting with Adam, through Abraham, David, Jesus, and down to themselves.

Joanne didn’t know what to do with a genealogy, nor do we. But this “primitive” headman knew what to do with it. He understood that a genealogy places you into a bigger story. He placed himself and his tribe into that story, into the genealogy. This is why Alex Haley’s book *Roots* was so popular. Millions of people placed themselves into the story of Kunta Kinta. But the Christian gospel is usually presented without any roots, without any genealogies. As a result, we don’t understand our story. We’re orphaned and adrift in time with no anchor to the generations that have gone before.

Matthew understood the significance of roots. He started his gospel with a genealogy to firmly anchor Jesus in a broader story. He entitles this:

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt 1:1 NIV)

Matthew considered it vital that his readers see Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham, that is, that they place him within the broader story of David and Abraham. If we are to understand Jesus, therefore, we need to understand Abraham and David. But to understand Abraham, we need to understand the events that preceded him.

From Abel to Babel

In the eight chapters between the expulsion from the garden and the call of Abraham (Gen 4:1–11:26), mankind goes from bad to worse. These chapters can be conveniently divided into three cycles of sin, judgment and grace. In the first cycle, Cain slays Abel. God responds in judgment by cursing Cain, consigning him and his line to futility, but he also responds graciously by giving Adam and Eve a replacement son, Seth. In the second cycle, the sons of God marry the daughters of men. Just what this means is beyond my scope today, but the key issue is that the sons of God see what is good and they take (6:2), whereas God sees that this is evil (6:5). God responds in judgment by undoing Creation with the Flood waters, but he also responds graciously by remembering Noah (8:1), driving back the waters, accepting Noah’s offering, and making a covenant. In the third cycle, mankind gathers to build a mighty tower. God responds in judgment by confusing men’s language and scattering humanity across the face of the earth.

What is the point of these chapters, other than to give us interesting stories to teach our children in Sunday School? Two things. Firstly, they show the inability of mankind to find its way back to the garden. Indeed, humanity wanders further and further east of Eden (11:2). Secondly, they show God's repeated grace in the face of human wickedness. This grace is evident even in God's judgment. In each cycle God intercedes in judgment to limit the spread of evil. It is because he cares so deeply for his creation that he acts to restrain evil. It is the same way with parents and children. Parents discipline their children not because they don't care, but because they do care. Wise parents set boundaries for their children, and intercede when they stray beyond those boundaries. Children who grow up without boundaries are profoundly insecure, and often act up in a desperate attempt to get some sign from their parents that they care. Ultimately the problem of theodicy, that is of why God allows the continuation of evil, is hidden within his inscrutable will, but the clear message of Genesis 4-11 and of the rest of Scripture is that God sets bounds beyond which he will not allow evil to progress.

It is one thing to restrain evil, but how is evil to be reversed and ultimately eliminated? How is mankind to find its way back to the garden if it persists in wandering further and further east of Eden? By the end of Genesis 11 it has become clear that mankind cannot save itself, and that the only hope is for God to intervene.

Abraham

The way that God chooses to intervene is to summon an old man to head west.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

**"I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."** (Gen 12:1-3)

Abraham was a moon-worshiper in Ur, a cosmopolitan city in what is today southern Iraq. God intervened in this man's life and told him to leave everything and head west to an unknown land. God laid out his plan in a seven-line statement of intent, in which the verb "bless" and the noun "blessing" occur five times. Hitherto, God's world had labored more under curse than under blessing. But God was not content for it to remain so. He was determined to restore blessing to the world that he had formed and filled, and to the humanity that he had created to bear his image. Remember that for God to bless something is to ensure that it functions in accord with his will; for him to curse something is to consign it to futility. God told Abraham that he would bless him, that is, that he would restore him to be the sort of human he had created him to be.

God chose Abraham to be the recipient of his blessing, of his grace. Abraham was the beneficiary of God's election. At the

mention of election, people frequently object that God is unfair. But the previous chapters have shown us that without God's intervention there is no hope. Furthermore, God chose Abraham not just to bless him, but to pour blessing through him to all peoples on earth.

God's plan to restore blessing to humanity through Abraham had two main components: a seed and a land. God said that he would make Abraham "into a great nation." Though Abraham was an old man and his wife Sarah was barren, God would give them descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, as the sand on the seashore (15:5). God's plan was that this great company would be his people and that he would be their God (17:7). And this people would have a land, the land to which God had brought Abraham, the Promised Land (12:7).

But there was a delay before Abraham's seed would gain this land. Three generations later, the descendants of Abraham found themselves in Egypt, where eventually they were subjected to harsh slavery. But God raised up Moses and sent him to Pharaoh with the demand, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me" (Exod 7:16; 8:1; 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). These oppressed Israelites, these children of Abraham, were the people of God. The Lord destined them not for a life of slavery but for a life of worship. And so the Lord went into battle against the Egyptian gods and against Pharaoh. He defeated the forces that held the Israelites in bondage, brought them through the Red Sea and the wilderness and brought them to Mount Sinai. Here he said to them,

"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6)

God had delivered the Israelites so that he might bring them to himself and make them his treasured possession, the personal treasure of the King of Heaven. The Lord redeemed Israel to be nothing less than the new humanity, the people restored to fellowship with God. God had the people build a tabernacle so that he could dwell with them. He was bringing them through the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey, a land that was to be a recreation of the garden of Eden.

God's purpose for these children of Abraham can be best summed up this way: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you."

David

Under the leadership of Joshua, God brought his people into the Promised Land, into this new Eden. But to take the land, the people needed to be faithful and obedient, which they ceased to be after the death of Joshua. The end of the book of Judges summarizes it this way: "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg 17:6; 21:25). Do you hear the echoes? The Israelites strayed so far from the Lord that he allowed the ark of the covenant to be captured by the Philistines (1 Sam 4). Since the ark represented God's presence among his people, God was essentially going into voluntary exile, saying that he would rather live with the Philistines than with his own people! The Israelites had a solution; they told Samuel:

“We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” (1 Sam 8:19-20)

But God had called Israel to be unlike all the other nations. God gave them the sort of king they were looking for, Saul, and he proved a disaster. But then God gave them his idea of a king, David, a man after his own heart. David did what earlier generations had been unable to do: he completed the conquest of the land. As soon as he became king of all Israel, he defeated the Philistines, captured Jerusalem, and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. God thereby returned to live in the midst of his people. In Jerusalem were enthroned two kings: God, the heavenly king, and David, his earthly representative. A king lives in a palace, so after David built his own palace, he thought it appropriate that he build God’s palace, the temple (2 Sam 7:1-2).

Through the prophet Nathan God told David that it would not be he, David, who would build the temple, but a son that the Lord would raise up for him (2 Sam 7:13). Furthermore, he, the Lord, would adopt this son: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam 7:14). It initially seemed that Solomon would be this promised son. He was unparalleled in his wisdom as a ruler, and he did indeed build a temple for the Lord. The glory of the Lord filled this temple as God took up residence in his earthly palace, enthroned in the midst of his people. Israel was a colony of heaven on earth. The kings of the earth sent their representatives to this colony, seeking blessing (1 Kgs 4:34). The most famous visitor was the Queen of Sheba. She “was overwhelmed” at what she saw and praised the Lord (1 Kgs 10:5, 9).

Exile

“King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women” (1 Kgs 11:1). Solomon lost his passion for the Lord. Israel, the colony of heaven, began to fall apart. Eventually God withdrew his glory from the temple (Ezek 10) and sent the people into exile to Babylon. The echoes of Genesis 3 are unmistakable. In each case, the people that God had created to be his earthly representatives were expelled east of Eden.

Matthew takes the Exile of Israel to Babylon as the third defining moment of Israel’s history. Though some Israelites did come back to the land seventy years later, the Jews of Jesus’ day viewed themselves as still being in exile. They were ruled by Rome. They had a king who had built a magnificent temple, but this man, Herod, whom Rome acknowledged as King of the Jews, was not a Jew himself, and certainly not a son of David.

Jesus

Matthew concludes his genealogy by noting

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ. (Matt 1:17)

There were three periods of fourteen generations, or six periods of seven generations. Matthew thus prepares his readers to expect the inauguration of the seventh period, in which Jesus will fulfill the promise of each of these earlier periods. He would end Israel’s exile. He would be the true son of David who would build the temple as God’s earthly palace, and would rule Israel, heaven’s

colony on earth. He would be the son of Abraham who would restore Israel to its status as most favored nation, living in the Promised Land.

If you don’t understand this genealogy, then you can’t really understand what Jesus’ ministry was all about. Jesus walked into this ongoing story, but he played his part in ways that defied everyone’s expectations. He redefined all the terms.

Jesus redefined exile. The Jews saw Rome as the problem, as the enemy that enslaved them. But Jesus saw that the enemy was not Rome, but Satan, the strong man whom he had come to bind. Not only were the Jews in bondage to this strong man, but the Jewish leaders were behaving as his agents, opposing God’s will. These Jewish leaders were holding the people in as much bondage as the Romans. Jesus delivered people from exile by healing the sick, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the blind, the leper, the demon-possessed. He bid all who were weary and burdened to come to him and find rest (Matt 11:28).

Jesus redefined temple. The Jews expected a Messianic King, a son of David, to build a magnificent building in Jerusalem to serve as God’s Temple. But Jesus said that he himself was the Temple.

Jesus redefined kingdom. The Jews wanted to throw the Romans out and re-establish Israel as a strong and independent nation. But the kingdom that Jesus talked about, the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, had nothing to do with throwing the Romans out.

Jesus redefined the children of Abraham. The Jewish leaders boasted of their genetic descent from Abraham. But Jesus said that the true children of Abraham were those who did the things that Abraham did, namely to respond in faith to God and his promises. By their behavior, the Jewish leaders showed that they were children of the devil (John 8:44). These leaders prided themselves on their orthodoxy and saw themselves as worthy of being God’s people. They excluded all those whom they saw unworthy: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers. Jesus made a point of mixing with these excluded people, healing them and eating with them.

If Jesus’ ministry took people by surprise, then even more so his death. There’s no getting away from this death. Each of the gospels focuses on it, devoting much space to the final week, the final night, the final hours. Many people admire Jesus as a teacher and healer, but if that is all you see Jesus as then you completely miss the point. His ministry in Galilee was the prelude to his journey to Jerusalem, to meet his death.

Why did Jesus die? In human terms, he died at the hands of the Jewish and Roman leaders who entered into an unholy alliance. But in God’s broader economy why did Jesus die? Paul came to understand that to answer that question you have to go back not just to exile, or to David, or to Abraham, but all the way back to Adam. God created Adam to be his faithful and obedient servant. Through his disobedience not only did Adam die, but all who are descended from him also died. Jesus did what Adam failed to do, and what Israel failed to do. He lived out his life on earth in faithful obedience to God. Theologians talk of his active and passive obedience. He was actively obedient in all that he did and said. Because of this active obedience, Jesus is the only man

who has not deserved death. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21). In passive obedience, Jesus then bore the punishment that should have been ours—death. Through that death Jesus paid the price so that we might live. Paul develops this argument at length in Rom 5:12-21.

But there is more. By raising Jesus from the dead, God showed that he accepted Jesus’ sacrifice, and that the power of death was broken. Forty days later, Jesus ascended to heaven, where God enthroned him in glory at his right hand. Ten days after that, on the day of Pentecost, God sent his spirit to birth the church.

The Church

What then is the Church? It is not a building or an earthly institution. Peter described the church using the language of Israel:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9-10)

The church is God’s people. It is made up of the last, the least, the lost, and the dead, who have been redeemed from slavery, brought back from exile, called from the wilderness back into the garden. God is calling a people from every nation, just as he told Abraham.

The church is God’s kingdom on earth. It is the realm in which God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Our king is Jesus, son of David, enthroned at God’s right hand. It is a kingdom that cuts across all national borders. Other kingdoms have tried to stamp out this kingdom, but they pass away, while God’s kingdom endures.

The church is God’s temple, his dwelling place on earth. While true that God resides in each believer, it is the church as a whole that forms the temple. It was the Corinthian church, the most messed-up church in the NT, that Paul told was the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16).

The church is a colony of heaven, populated by people whose citizenship is not in the USA or any other earthly kingdom, but in heaven. In this colony we walk to the beat of a different drum, living life the way God intended it to be lived, living as people set free. Within this colony we live now the life of heaven—this is what eternal life means; it’s literally the life of the age to come. When the church lives this sort of life, people in the wilderness outside will see heaven and want in.

The Communion Meal

One of the ways in which we place ourselves in the larger story is to eat a meal together. Once a year the Jews gathered to eat the Passover meal. Around the table they told the events of the Exodus as if they had happened just yesterday, and as if they themselves had been present. On the night that he was betrayed Jesus ate a Passover meal with his disciples, but midway through the meal he expanded the story. As we eat the Lord’s Supper we rehearse that larger story. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

Firstly, we are to think of God. When Jesus broke the bread, he gave thanks to God for his provision. So we give thanks to God for his provision not just of our material needs, but of our much greater spiritual needs.

Next, we are to think of Christ. The bread and the cup, though simple elements in themselves, represent the body and blood of the Lord Jesus: the body which was broken for us, and the blood which was spilled for us. We look back two thousand years ago, remembering that he went to the cross for us, and paid the price we could not pay, so that we could be reconciled to God.

Thirdly, we are to think of ourselves. We examine ourselves, acknowledging that it was for our sins that Christ went to the cross, and that we have an ongoing need for forgiveness.

Fourthly, we are to think of those around us. Though the bread represents the body of the Lord, we also are the body of the Lord. We have been redeemed not to be isolated individuals, but to be the corporate body of Christ, the people of God. When we take communion together, we acknowledge that we are part of one family.

Finally, we are to look ahead, for there is more of the story still to come. In eating this bread and drinking this cup, we proclaim that the Lord will return. Then we will cease to be a colony of heaven on earth, for at that time heaven and earth shall be joined together. But that part of the story is for next time.

1. Joanne Shetler, *And the Word Came With Power* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1992).

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Revelation 21:1-5

Fourth Message

Bernard Bell

December 12th, 1999

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

SERIES: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE NEW, AND THE PERFECT

Our offertory today was *The Prayer of St Gregory* by the contemporary American composer Alan Hovhaness. You may not think of prayer and the book of Revelation as having anything to do with one another, but prayer has a significant place in this book.

In just twenty days we will enter the new year, the new century, and the new millennium. Even if you point out that the new millennium really arrives with 2001, or that the calendar is off by four years, or that this is the new millennium only in the Gregorian calendar, nevertheless millennium fever abounds. Not for a thousand years has there been an occasion like this. And just like a thousand years ago, apocalyptic fervor is in the air. You may not be able to give a precise definition for that term, “apocalyptic,” but the word is thrown around enough that most people have a general idea that it concerns the end times. We sense that T.S. Eliot has it wrong in his poem *The Hollow Men*, where he concludes, “This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but with a whimper.” The very word “Armageddon” is enough to strike terror into people. At times of apocalyptic fervor, people turn to Revelation in search of a timetable. Witness the tremendous popularity of the *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

How to Read Revelation

No book of the Bible has been interpreted in more different ways than the book of Revelation. At the outset, let me give you three guidelines to help you understand the book.

First, we need to recognize what type of literature Revelation is. We automatically change the way we read and interpret a piece of writing according to our recognition of its genre, that is, of the literary category into which it fits. We don't open a phone book and start reading as if it were a love letter. Revelation claims to be three different types of literature. In the first place, it is an *apocalypse*, the Greek word for revelation:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John. (REV 1:1 NIV)

God revealed to John matters that would otherwise have remained unknown, and he did it through a chain of intermediaries: God to Jesus Christ to his angel and finally to John. (There was a further link in the chain as John passed the revelation on to the seven churches.) This is nothing new for us, for we all know this book as Revelation, or The Apocalypse. But the most important events that were revealed to John were not events that would happen in the future, but events that were happening right then and there, in the otherwise unseen realm of heaven. It is these glimpses into heaven that make sense of all that happens

on earth, not only in the future, but, just as importantly, in the present.

This book is, secondly, a *prophecy*:

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (1:3)

Contrary to popular opinion, prophecy is not foretelling the future, but “forthtelling” the word of God in the present. God had revealed his word to his prophet John, who would normally proclaim it aloud to its intended audience, the seven churches. But John could not be present to proclaim that word in person. He therefore committed it to writing, instructing that it be read aloud—the reading here is not private reading, but reading aloud in a corporate setting. That corporate setting was the church service. As the community gathered for worship, this book was read aloud, the words carrying the full authority of the prophet John, and of God, whose mouthpiece John was. Perhaps we should have a worship service like that, where Revelation is read and we pause to sing the seventeen hymns that this book contains. That would be a profound worship experience. It would also profoundly affect how we understand the book.

Revelation is, thirdly, a *letter*:

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4-5)

John could not be present with the churches among whom he normally exercised a prophetic ministry. So he cast his prophecy in the form of a letter. Most people know that this book contains the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is one letter addressed to all seven churches. Within this one letter are seven messages, addressed one to each church (chapters 2–3).

Recognizing Revelation as a letter has some profound implications. A letter differs from a book in that a letter is directed at a specific group of people whom the author usually knows well (junk mail excepted!). John knew the seven churches to whom he wrote; he knew their struggles, their successes and failures. In the seven messages of chapters 2–3 he addresses some of these specific issues, but the whole book is directly addressed to these churches at the end of the first century.

This may surprise you to know that this book was not written primarily for us at the turn of the second millennium. It is commonplace nowadays to interpret the book in the light of cur-

rent geopolitical events and military hardware; to assume that the primary audience of the book is Western Christians sitting in their comfortable armchairs with *Time Magazine* and *Jane's Defense Weekly* open on their lap. Actually, the book does have a tremendous amount to say to just such people, but you'll only appreciate that message if you first wrestle through what this book meant to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

My other two guidelines for reading Revelation are briefer. This book is the most carefully structured book of the NT. As I've said before, correct interpretation of Scripture requires recognition of its literary structure. Finally, Revelation is filled with the language and imagery of the OT. Though there is not a single quote directly from the OT, there are some 350 allusions to the OT. So, to understand the language and imagery we would be better putting away *Newsweek*, and having instead the OT open on our lap. To give one example, the blowing of the fifth trumpet in chapter 9 unleashes upon the earth some fiercesome beasts: locusts that are said to be like both scorpions and horses. To understand this imagery don't turn to a handbook of late twentieth century military hardware to identify which type of helicopter gunship these beasts represent. Instead, turn to the OT and its imagery of locusts as instruments of devastating judgment.

"I am making everything new"

With this groundwork laid, let's turn to our text for this morning, Rev 21:1-5:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21:1-5)

Let me remind you that today we come to the last of our series of four messages looking at the history of redemption. I have entitled this series, "The Good, The Bad, The New, and the Perfect," to reflect the four main acts of this drama. In the first act, God created a world that was very good. In the second act, man and woman rebelled against God, acting in moral autonomy and setting themselves up as God by deciding what was good in their own eyes. God responded by expelling mankind from his presence. But God also embarked on a path of redemption to restore creation to the state of the very good, nay, to take it beyond that state into the perfect. Act Three describes the drama of redemption, whereby God called out a people for himself and dealt with the problem of sin and death through the Lord Jesus Christ. The final act, an act without end, is the entrance into the state of the perfect. Hints of this act are scattered throughout Scripture, for example in Isaiah 65:17-25 that was read for us earlier. But our primary source of information is the last two chapters of Revela-

tion. Here this act is introduced with the ringing cry from God himself, "I am making everything new."

New Creation

The first thing that John describes is a new heaven and a new earth. The drama of Revelation unfolds on three stages: heaven, earth, and the Abyss. Heaven is the home of God; it was also the original home of Satan. But in chapter 12 we read of rebellion in heaven:

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (12:7-9)

After this expulsion from heaven, the true home of Satan—also known as the dragon, the serpent, the devil—is the Abyss, which we might think of as the underworld. The earth is in the middle between these two realms, between heaven and earth. Earth is the war zone between God and Satan. Revelation is full of verbs of vertical motion describing what goes up and down between heaven and earth, and between earth and the Abyss.

Up from the Abyss come Satan and his cohorts. The most famous of these is the "beast coming out of the sea" (13:1), described also as "the beast that comes up from the Abyss" (11:7). In Biblical symbolism these are the same places, for the sea is that which is chaotic and opposed to God. These creatures lay claim to the earth, and lay claim to the allegiance and worship of the residents of earth. For example,

The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (13:3-4)

To the believers in the seven churches, this beast from the sea was Rome. Declaring itself "the eternal city," Rome spread its tentacles throughout the world. Rome was personified in Caesar, who claimed divine status. The first few Caesars were exalted to divine status only upon their death, but by the middle of the first century AD, the Caesars claimed the divine title while yet living. Throughout the Empire, the people were called to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. This arrogation of imperial and divine might was, in the view of Revelation, Satanic.

This was the world that the members of the seven churches knew only too well. Daily they were faced with the challenge of acknowledging Caesar as Lord and Rome as sovereign. Failure to do so was costly. John knew this from personal experience. The reason he could not be present with these churches was that he had been sent into exile on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea not far from Ephesus. He was sent there "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9), a phrase that occurs repeatedly throughout the book. To hold to "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" meant to acknowledge Jesus not Caesar as Lord. Doing so brought one into conflict with the imperial might of Rome, for it was an act of treason. Such behavior cost many Christians their lives.

Revelation is about worship. Were the seven churches going to succumb to pressure and worship Caesar, or were they going to hold firm and worship God and Christ? We all worship, whether such worship is conscious or not. The question is not whether we worship, but whom we worship. Do we worship the dragon from the Abyss and his earthly representatives, or do we worship the God of heaven and Jesus Christ? Is your allegiance pulled up to heaven or down to the Abyss? Rome and Caesar are long gone, but Satan from the Abyss still lays claim to the allegiance of the inhabitants of earth. Calvin was only too right when he described the human heart as an efficient manufacturer of idols. What are your idols?

How were these seven churches in Asia Minor to be encouraged to hold firm to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” to continue to proclaim Jesus, not Caesar, as Lord? The encouragement comes from showing them not what would happen at some distant time in the future, but what was going on right then in heaven. Throughout the book John is given visions into heaven. Central to these visions is the heavenly throne and its occupant. Throughout Revelation God is usually described as “the one who sits upon the throne.” Beside him is Jesus Christ, the Lamb that was slain. Gathered around the throne is a great company which worships God and the Lamb. Included among these heavenly worshipers are not only the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders, but also God’s people drawn from every tribe, language, people and tongue. Their worship is captured for us in seventeen hymns.

Since the church is a colony of heaven on earth, we join in the heavenly chorus and sing those same hymns, such as this one which closes Handel’s Messiah:

**Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!
To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever! (5:12-13)**

Seen against the backdrop of Roman imperial power, singing those hymns on earth as in heaven would be a treasonable act. There are plenty of places today where it is still an act of treason.

In addition to the worship in heaven, John also sees the vertical movement between heaven and earth. Up to heaven go the souls of the saints martyred for holding to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Rome thinks it has won a victory in killing these saints, but the victory is theirs for they join the heavenly choir gathered around the throne. Up to heaven also go the prayers of the saints on earth:

**When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven
for about half an hour.**

**And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to
them were given seven trumpets.**

**Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at
the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers
of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The
smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints,
went up before God from the angel’s hand. Then the angel
took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled**

**it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings,
flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (8:1-5)**

In this remarkable passage there is silence in heaven so that God can hear the prayers of his people on earth. The suffering of the beleaguered Christians on earth did not go unnoticed in heaven.

Down from heaven come God’s judgments upon Satan and his earthly representatives. John is given a vision of the day when these judgments bring the war on earth to an end. Chapter 20 presents the final removal of the residents of the Abyss: Satan, the two beasts, and death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire. Never again can they rise up to exert any influence on earth. God places an impermeable barrier between earth and the Abyss. It is only when this barrier is in place that there can be a new heaven and a new earth. Furthermore, with the removal of sin and death from the earth, heaven and earth will be joined together into one realm.

Within this conjoined heaven and earth there is no room for the sea, which is the same as saying there will be no more Abyss. The sea has always been symbolic of that which is chaotic. Genesis 1:2 describes the earth as covered with sea and darkness. It had been neither formed nor filled. In forming the earth, God drove back both the darkness and the sea. That process of bringing order is not complete until these last two chapters of Revelation where the sea and the darkness (22:5) are completely eliminated.

New Jerusalem

The second thing that John sees is “the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” Revelation is a “tale of two cities,” a tale that is embedded into the very structure of the book as shown by a comparison of 17:1-3 and 22:9-10.

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and
said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the
great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings
of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the
earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” Then
the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There
I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered
with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.
(17:1-3)**

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the
seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show
you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away
in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me
the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from
God. (21:9-10)**

Each city is personified as a woman, but Babylon is a prostitute who sits on the waters, while Jerusalem is a bride from heaven. The seven churches would have recognized Babylon as Rome, but Babylon is more than just Rome. Throughout the Bible, Babylon is the people of this world set against God. This has been so ever since mankind gathered together to build the tower of Babel. Babylon views itself as autonomous, but Revelation views it as the puppet of Satan. Rome may be dead, but Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley. Wherever God’s creatures are living out their lives in autonomy from him, there is Babylon.

Revelation assures us that Babylon will ultimately be destroyed. This Fall of Babylon, described in chapter 18, precipitates a response from the heavenly choir gathered around the throne, the Hallelujah Chorus that we all know from Handel's Messiah:

“Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns” (19:6)

The removal of Babylon clears the stage for the entrance of the other woman, the new Jerusalem. Instead of a prostitute we have a bride, instead of an orgy a wedding. Jerusalem, or Zion, has always been the community of God's people.

Note that there are only two cities, Babylon and the new Jerusalem. If you are not a resident of the one you are a resident of the other. There is no sitting on the fence. This is just another way of saying you either worship the beast or the Lamb, you bear on your forehead either the mark of the beast or the seal and name of God. Again, it comes down to worship.

John describes the new Jerusalem in considerable detail. The dimensions of this new Jerusalem are given in 21:16. It is a cube, of equal length, width and height. The only other thing in Scripture that is cubic is the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and temple. The new Jerusalem is the new Holy of Holies. Jerusalem is the city of God's people, but the Holy of Holies is the earthly dwelling place of God. So, in this new cosmos the dwelling place of God and the dwelling place of mankind are equated, one of numerous ways we are told that heaven and earth will be joined. This new Holy of Holies is of immense size: 1500 miles (NASB) or 12,000 stadia (NIV) on a side. Physically those are identical dimensions, but symbolically they are far different. The number 12,000 is symbolic, as is every other number in the book. Twelve represents the people of God, as in the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. One thousand is representative of the infinite. So I'm not looking for a giant cube, 1500 miles on each side, to descend on the earth like a spaceship; instead, I'm looking for a city that will be of infinite size. Since this city is the Holy of Holies, it means that the Temple fills the city, which fills the whole cosmos.

Within this city, John sees the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (22:2). Beside the river is the tree of life. This is the imagery of Eden. The new Jerusalem is paradise restored.

Garden, temple, city, land are all distinct symbols in the OT. In the new cosmos they are all co-extensive. This has two implications: God's dwelling place and man's dwelling place are equated, and all is rendered holy. But that's just another way of saying that there will be no more sea or no more darkness. It is because all is holy that there will be no temple. The whole cosmos will be God's Temple, as it was always intended to be. And all God's people will dwell with him.

New Covenant

After seeing the new cosmos, and the new Jerusalem, John hears a voice which essentially explains the implications of the two things that he has seen. It is a voice which announces the fulfillment of the covenant.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (21:3-4)

As I have said before, at the heart of the covenant between God and man lies the promise of God, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” The more I study Scripture the more convinced I am that the story of creation and redemption is driven by this determination on the part of God to dwell with his people. From every tribe, language, people, and nation, God is calling out a people for himself, a people with whom to dwell. God redeems us in order to have communion with us. This is beautifully pictured as God wiping away every tear from our eyes. And we shall see his face (22:4).

The End of the Beginning

The last few chapters of Revelation describe not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning. With the removal of sin and death, God finally restores his cosmos to its pre-Fall state. But he does far more than that. He goes far beyond the first creation. In that first creation, heaven and earth are distinct realms. The earth is a mixture of land and sea, of light and darkness. Though good it was never perfect—using “perfect” to mean its finished state. With the removal of sea and of darkness, with the conjoining of heaven and earth, God moves creation into a state far better than that described in Genesis 1–2. We began with an undifferentiated world of sea and darkness. We end with an undifferentiated world of land and light. It's in that new heavens and new earth where all is holy that life will really begin, the way that God intended it finally to be.

Psychologists know that a sense of purpose is essential to emotional and psychological health. We look for a meta-narrative, an overarching story that makes sense of all of the little stories of our lives. Fragmented by the loose strands of our lives, we yearn for a sense of ending that ties everything together. Revelation is the most important book for making sense of your life, for in it we get not only a vision of the ending, but a vision of heaven today. Central to both visions is the heavenly throne. Now we see the throne by faith; in the new Jerusalem we shall see the throne by sight. This double vision of Revelation is well-captured by the final verse of the hymn, *This is my Father's World*:

This is my Father's world
 O let me ne'er forget
 That though the wrong seem oft so strong
 God is the Ruler yet.
 This is my Father's world:
 The battle is not done
 Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
 And earth and heaven be one.

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