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God's World and God's People



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Introduction to

God's World and God's People

Appropriately enough, the Bible commences with these words: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). What follows that pregnant sentence in Genesis is a wonderful series of stories about the creation of the world and its creatures. There are stories about how God’s good creation went awry and narratives about the divine determination to restore a wayward world to God’s self. In particular, Genesis introduces us to Abraham, a particular descendant of the first humans, Adam and Eve, and to Abraham’s wife Sarah. The texts tell us about that family’s faults and foibles, but mostly about a Lord who simply will not rest until the *shalom* (peace) of the original creation is restored.

The ending of this story, of course, runs well past the episodes discussed in this quarter. God’s full story includes Jesus Christ, the quintessential descendant of Abraham; a cross; an empty tomb; and a distant glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem.

With Genesis, however, we make a beginning. We will examine God’s creation of the universe, the earth, and its creatures, especially human beings. Sometimes we might discover that the stories raise as many questions as they answer. It may be the case that to hear the Truth of God’s revelation in Genesis—that is, Truth spelled with a capital “T”—we will need to open ourselves to reading familiar stories with new lenses. We will almost certainly be left in wondering awe at the breadth of God’s loving patience with human beings and with the chosen family of Abraham.

The first three sessions concentrate on God’s creation of the universe, earth, and people—a creation God declares to

be “good.” Session 4 explores how the Lord created human beings to be in community with one another in ways that provide security and joy. Session 5 explores humankind’s rebellion against their creator in an attempt to be like God.

Sessions 6 and 7 focus on God’s interactions with Noah and his descendants. Although Noah is an obedient preservationist, the focus is once again on God’s intention to restore the world to God’s self.

That same divine determination leads to a study of the Lord’s promises of blessing to Abraham and Sarah in Session 8. How God might deliver on the trifold promises of land, children, and blessing is not always straightforward. Session 9 explores how the Lord providentially provided a wife for Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah.

Sessions 10 through 13 examine the life of Abraham and Sarah’s grandson, Jacob. Jacob was not an obvious choice as the recipient of God’s promises. Nevertheless, his complicated life and family remind us of God’s determination and faithfulness.

Purpose of the Study

The goals of this study are to help participants reflect on God’s intentions in creating the world, human beings, and human com-

munity and to consider what it means to be created “in the image of God.” Group members will discover the breadth of God’s fierce determination to restore the world to God’s self and marvel at God’s willingness to work through ordinary people to bring about God’s good ends. Such exploration will encourage all participants to fear and love God more and more.

Our Writer

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He waxes on with interminable lectures at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa, where he has taught since 1994. Generally humorless, his few friends describe him with words like “dusty,” “tepid,” and “milquetoast.” He collects mustard.

God Created the Heavens and Earth

Genesis 1:1-13 ■ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

⁶ And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷ So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸ God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

⁹ And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. ¹¹ Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. ¹² The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

Theme Statement

In the opening verses of the Bible, we encounter God, who confronts darkness and chaos and with a word brings light and order into being. God's ability to bring light to the world was a promise to ancient Israel during the time of exile in Babylon, and it remains a promise for us today.

Exploring the Word

Our study begins, appropriately, "in the beginning," as we consider the first three days of the creation. During those first three days, God creates appropriate habitable space for the creatures that will populate these spaces on the fourth through sixth days.

Biblical scholars agree that writers with priestly concerns composed Genesis 1:1—2:4a during the Babylonian Exile or shortly thereafter. Following a prolonged siege, the Babylonian army razed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. The Babylonians took captive many who survived the slaughter and deported them to Babylon. For both the captives and those left behind in the charred ruins of Jerusalem, the loss of both the promised land and the temple surely felt like they had entered a dark, formless void. For a sense of the social and spiritual devastation, read Psalm 137 or a chapter or two from the book of Lamentations, texts that reflect the despair that resulted from the crushing defeat of Judah. During the exile, however, the priestly writers told a hope-filled story about God, who could wrestle order out of the worst sort of chaos and speak light out of darkness.

1:1-5 The first day

We can see from the footnote following the opening "In the beginning when God created," that the NRSV translators had to make a choice when they interpreted the original Hebrew. While the NRSV translation is not the only possible way to read these first words, it does help us to understand that verse 2 describes the working conditions and materials at God's disposal. In the beginning, *when* God began to create,

a watery formless void was present, enshrouded in darkness, while a wind from God (or a mighty wind) swept over the waters. If we can conjure an image of an uncontrolled storm on the sea at night, then we have come close to the image the authors intended.

Naturally, the “wind from God” raises other questions. As another footnote indicates, the original Hebrew can also be read as the “spirit of God,” or even as “a mighty wind.” While “spirit of God” may be soothingly familiar, it contradicts the image of a formless, dark, watery chaos that comes before it in verse 2. God must create and order the heavens and the earth out of the tempestuous darkness.

The first step for God is the creation of light. As with all things God creates in this chapter, God has merely to speak to summon light into being. God pronounced the light “good,” and then made a division between day and night.

1:6-8 The second day

On the second day, God created a division in the chaotic waters by separating the waters above and below with a “dome,” or a “firmament” (KJV). Ancient Israelites observed that the sky gave every appearance of being solid, deducing that it must be solid enough to keep out the waters that were above it (v. 7, see Psalm 148:4). God named the dome “sky,” but in Hebrew, the word for sky is related to the word for water (*shāmayim* / *māyim*). Ancient Hebrews believed that beyond the “dome” cosmic waters threatened to submerge the creation. The separation of the waters above and the waters below depended on the dome that God created and sustained. Meanwhile, when God did wish it to rain or snow, God opened windows in the dome (Genesis 7:11; 8:2; Psalm 78:23).

Like other ancient peoples, ancient Israelites regarded the sea as a symbol of chaos and disorder that God’s power could control and defeat. Elsewhere in the Scriptures, we see God dividing the sea and, in so doing, defeating sea monsters like dragons and Leviathan (Psalm 74:13-14).

1:9-13 The third day

On the third day, God created dry land. Regarding the division between the Earth and the Seas, for the second time in this chapter God pronounced the creation “good.”

The ancient Israelites conceived of the earth as a flat disk, floating on the waters below it (Psalm 136:6). The dome above the earth and seas was thought to be held up at its extremities by mountains (Job 26:11; see Psalm 46:2-3), while the earth was supported by subterranean pillars (Job 9:6; Psalm 75:3).

Dry land, by itself, however, would not satisfy the needs of its intended occupants. Consequently, God created vegetation—plants and fruit trees of every sort—each with the ability to reproduce from its own seed. In other words, the divine intention was, and presumably still is, that the Earth’s vegetation would be self-reproducing as God created it. God’s original judgment was that this, too, was “good.”



The Word Today



I recently attended the internment of a friend’s ashes on a cloudless, crisp, and sunlit day. Yet, for me, the day was a formless void, devoid of light, with storm winds that threatened to blow me apart. Grief is like that, as is despair, loss, loneliness, and depression. A diagnosis of cancer, a turn around the corner to see the ambulance parked in your driveway, a too long overdue loved one—these and a thousand other of life’s fears and tragedies—are like the howling, hungry dark of Genesis 1:2. The world spins out of control, nothing is solid, and a formless void envelops us.

Ancient Israelites knew about that. Completely unprepared for the violence of the Babylonian invasion, they witnessed the burning of every significant structure in Jerusalem, including Solomon’s Temple. The invaders razed the walls of the city and slaughtered any who resisted them. Once enslaved and marched to Babylon, their captors mocked them

and proclaimed that the Babylonian deity, Marduk, created and ruled the cosmos.

Where was God in that dark maelstrom? Was Marduk superior after all? Was God even present?

Hope—not answers, but hope—came from a story told by ancient believers about the creation. The priests reminded their neighbors about the identity of their God. God, they said, knew all about darkness, about a formless void, and about howling storm winds. God knew about chaos, and how to handle it. Indeed, for God to banish chaos, God needed only to speak. “Let there be light,” God said, and it was so.

God spoke and chaos retreated. Light, order, and purpose came into being. And it was good.

This transcendent, creating God continued to speak. The Fourth Evangelist describes the Word that was with God in the beginning, through whom all things came into being and in whom was the life and the light of all people (John 1:1-4). That “Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14).

Nor is John alone. The author of Hebrews declares, “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Colossians 1:15-17 proclaims: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

God continues to speak. With a word, water becomes the means by which we become children of light. With a word, Christ comes in bread and wine, reminding us that someday we will hear him call our names. We live in the light of Christ’s presence, and he will banish chaos forever.



Questions for Discussion



Beginnings

1. What is the most amazing thing you have ever seen in creation?
2. Recall a time when you felt like your life was dark, chaotic, or out of control. Describe that experience to another person in the group.

Exploring the Word

1. Consider footnote “a” in Genesis 1:1. Of the three possible translations, which do you prefer and why? How much of a difference do these alternatives make in the way you understand the verse?
2. Consider footnote “b” in verse 2. How do each of the three possible translations change the meaning of the verse for you?

To me, “while a wind from God” says _____

To me, “while the spirit of God” says _____

To me, “while a mighty wind” says _____

3. List the elements in the biblical description of the first three days of creation that are in tension with a contemporary view of the universe.
4. Find the three places in verses 1 to 13 where God declares something to be good. Why are these things “good”? What, in your view, does the biblical author mean by “good”?

The Word Today

1. Complete this sentence: The promise I find in this passage is _____.

2. What you think God has been saying to you lately?



Closing Prayer

O God, as you once spoke to darkness and called into being light and life, we pray that you will help us listen for you in our own dark times. Then, we pray, speak through us that we might testify to the wonder and the love you shine on us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Further Study

Psalm 19:1-6; John 1:1-14

Daily Readings

M 1 Peter 4:15-19

F Matthew 5:43-48

T Colossians 3:8-11

S Psalm 33:1-9

W Isaiah 41:17-20

S Genesis 1:1-13

T Mark 4:35-41

Memorization

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.
(Genesis 1:3)