

Chapter 1: Creation

Genesis 1:1–2:3

In every temptation to sin, our Enemy seeks to convince us that our ways would be better than God's ways. Either we start to believe that what God has revealed to us is not good, or not true, or perhaps not even all that relevant to our lives. As these thoughts begin to poison our minds, we seek to liberate ourselves from God's structures, God's gifts, and God's rhythms of living. More and more, we long to define our own purposes, to provide for ourselves, and to order our lives as we see fit. The further we go down that road, the more satisfied we begin to feel, smugly confident that we are finally able to gain the good that God wants to keep us from enjoying. That is not simply how we feel about *our* lives today; it is also a summary of the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve that we will study in Genesis 3. Very soon after God's initial work of creation, humankind will begin a trajectory of doubting God that will plague us until Jesus returns.

Why, though, should anyone *want* to trust God? What good can we gain from God that we cannot acquire for ourselves, on our own? To answer these questions, we must go all the way back to the beginning. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God's creation was not *good* from the start (Gen. 1:2), but by the end of the week God had formed and filled his work to the extent that it was *very good* (Gen. 1:31). Unless we understand the goodness of God's original design and the chaotic curse of life *outside* of God's original design, we will struggle to understand and to trust him when he speaks. Beyond telling us *what* happened at the beginning of time, Genesis 1:1–2:3 tells us *why* it happened and *what* God's work in creation means for our lives today.

Forming the Formlessness (Gen. 1:1–10)

Genesis 1 is true, but it does not communicate truth in a cold, lifeless manner. Rather, Genesis 1 is a masterpiece of artistic and literary beauty. For example, the first two Hebrew words both begin with the same three letters (note: Hebrew reads from right to left): **בראשית ברא**.¹ Additionally, the first verse contains a total of 7 words, and then the second verse contains 14 words (7 x 2)—and even specific words in this opening chapter appear in multiples of 7, such as “God” (35x), “heavens” (21x), “and it was so” (7x), and “God saw that it was good” (7x).² With artistic subtlety, even the frequency of word repetition bears witness to the truth that God created the world in seven days! The manner in which the narrator structures this text, from beginning to end, should lead us into wonder, delight, and worship.

Beyond wordplay, this story of creation also contains, in seed form, a biblical theology that will shape an astonishing amount of what the rest of the Bible will address.³ The language surrounding time (“beginning,” Gen. 1:1; “seasons...days...years,” Gen. 1:14) will form the basis of Israel's calendar. The language surrounding the division of the waters in Gen. 1:6–7 will arise again at the

Red Sea during the Exodus (Ex. 14) and at the Jordan River before the conquest (Josh. 3–4). Finally, the “land” Yahweh creates employs the same word for the land that God will give to his people by promise. It is not an exaggeration to detect the entire story of the Bible in seed form within Genesis 1:1–2:3, running all the way to the Sabbath rest that still awaits the people of God (cf. Gen. 2:1–3; Heb. 4:9–10).

Setting the Stage

So, the entire cosmic drama of God’s creation begins with these simple words: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Immediately, we run into a critical interpretive question: In this verse, do we find (1) a summary overview of God’s entire work of creation that we read about in Genesis 1–2, or (2) God’s initial creation of the (unformed and unfilled) heavens and the earth?⁴ The way we interpret this first verse has a larger impact than we might expect.

If we choose option (1), seeing Genesis 1:1 as a fly-by overview, then we depend on the rest of this chapter to tell us what was created, and when. That is, strictly speaking, Genesis 1:1 does not narrate the creation of any specific part of creation, but only summarizes the process of creation as a whole. Since the rest of the chapter includes so many details about what God created on each day, it makes some sense to see this first verse as a heading to prepare us for what follows. Nevertheless, this option has a serious flaw. If Genesis 1:1 is only a summary heading to the story of creation, then we never actually discover how the formless, void, dark, and watery earth of Genesis 1:2 comes into existence. Suddenly, we see the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2), but we have no idea how those waters came into being. Are they eternal, like God? Did God create them, but he simply didn’t to tell us about it? Although we are told elsewhere that God created all things that exist (Isa. 44:24; John 1:3; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Rev. 4:11), and even though “God” is the only subject ever used in the Bible with the verb “create,” this first interpretative option does not explicitly link God with the creation of the dark, watery deep of Genesis 1:2.

With this in mind, option (2) makes a lot more sense. Under this view, Genesis 1:1 reports God’s first act of creation, and then Genesis 1:2 describes the initial product: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2). At the beginning, the heavens and the earth are (1) formless, (2) empty, (3) dark, and (4) comprised of deep waters. Importantly, we do *not* read that this initial work of creation is “good,” in contrast with what God says at each subsequent stage of his work in creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). God has begun his good creation, but he has more work to do before his creation will be good.

The four characteristics of the early form of the heavens and earth, then, identify what God must address in order to make his creation good. First, God will create light to separate the *darkness* (Gen. 1:3). Second, God will separate the waters (above and below the expanse; Gen. 1:6–10) to give form to the *formlessness* of the heavens and the earth. Third, God will separate the waters from dry land that will complement the *deep waters* (Gen. 1:9–10). Fourth, God will fill the *emptiness* of the heavens and the earth with plants, heavenly bodies, animals, and, ultimately, humankind (Gen. 1:11–31). The narrator tells us of the hovering presence of the Holy Spirit to explain how God holds together this dark, watery, formless, and empty creation before God begins the rest of his work to form it and to fill it.⁶

In the Beginning...

The symphony of God's creation opens on an unexpected note. If God is both good and all-powerful, then why does God create the world in this “not-yet” good state?⁷ Why not bring creation into existence fully formed and fully filled? Why does it take six days to make creation “very good” (Gen. 1:31)? It seems that God originally brings forth his creation as “formless and void” to foreshadow what will happen when sin and death enter the world. The curse of sin will eventually unravel God's good work of forming and filling so that creation will again become “without form and void” (cf. Jer. 4:23). Rather than enjoying the full goodness of creation forever, the sin of Adam and Eve will cause formlessness, emptiness, darkness, and even a watery flood (cf. Gen. 7) to return to the heavens and the earth.

For the moment, though, let us fix our attention on the goodness of creation in the beginning. There will be plenty of space for the Bible to unfold the tragedy of the sin and death that will enter the world through Adam and Eve. For the moment, our task is simply to gaze upon God's original, *good* creation.

Forming the Formless

When we think of creation, we primarily think in terms of *filling* the heavens and the earth with the sun, moon, stars, plants, fruit trees, fish, birds, livestock, and human beings. Importantly, God's first work in creation is actually to *form* the chaotic formless of the heavens and the earth. By doing this, God prepares the heavens and the earth to be filled. The word that the author of Genesis uses to describe this work of forming is *separation*.

On the first day, God begins the work of forming his creation by creating light to *separate* the light from the darkness: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen. 1:3–5). Where darkness had complete reign over the formless and empty form of creation, God creates light to drive away the darkness during the day. Then, God calls that light “good,” declaring the light to be “useful, fitting, and healthy.”⁸

Significantly, God does not banish darkness altogether, but he *separates* the light from the darkness. In this first act of God's work in organizing his creation, God appoints strict limitations for the darkness. God's first act of taming the chaos of the formless void of the heavens and earth, then, is to relegate darkness to the night by providing light that will flourish in the day. From this point forward in the story of the Bible, darkness will represent God's judgment, while light will represent God's “life, salvation, the commandments, and the presence of God.”⁹ Allen Ross writes:

Throughout Scripture light is the realm of God and the righteous; darkness is the domain of the Evil One and death. Light represents that which is holy, pure, true, life-giving, and gladdening. For example, when God brought the judgment of darkness on Egypt, Israel enjoyed light in their dwellings (Exod. 10:21–23). When Israel followed the Lord's light through the wilderness by night, they were assured of his presence. When they were instructed to keep the lamps burning in the Holy Place, they knew that there was something symbolic about that light.¹⁰

Ultimately, we read in the book of Revelation that the glory of God and the Lamb will fill the New Jerusalem with light so that the new creation will never again experience night (Rev. 21:25).

Forming the Waters

On the second and third days, God further tames the chaos of his creation by separating out the deeps of the waters that fill the heavens and the earth. On the second day, God separates the waters *vertically*: “And God said, ‘Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’ And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day” (Gen. 1:6–8). Whereas the watery deeps had originally filled heaven and earth, God separates the waters under the expanse (the seas) from the waters above the expanse (the clouds).

Now, when we read that God called the expanse “Heaven,” we should be careful not to read too much into what is being said. This does not refer to God’s heavenly courts, but to something more like “the sky.” John Sailhamer writes:

It appears more likely that the narrative has in view something within the everyday experience of the natural world: In a general way, that place where the birds fly and where God placed the lights of heaven (cf. v. 14). In English the word sky appears to cover this sense well.¹¹

God no longer permits the waters to cover everything. As he dealt with like the darkness on the first day, God here strictly limits the boundaries of the waters.

Similarly, on the third day, God separates the waters *horizontally*: “[9] And God said, ‘Let the waters under the heavens 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” (Gen. 1:9–10). Again, God gives the waters absolute limitations and boundaries. By limiting where the waters may gather, God brings forth dry land that is no longer covered by the waters of the seas.

Through the rest of the Bible, this act of separating the waters is one of God’s great boasts. For example, consider God’s words in Job 38:8–11:

[8] “Or who shut in the sea with doors
 when it burst out from the womb,
 [9] when I made clouds its garment
 and thick darkness its swaddling band,
 [10] and prescribed limits for it
 and set bars and doors,
 [11] and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
 and here shall your proud waves be stayed?’”

Or, Jeremiah 5:22:

Do you not fear me? declares the LORD.
 Do you not tremble before me?
 I placed the sand as the boundary for the sea,
 a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass;
 though the waves toss, they cannot prevail;
 though they roar, they cannot pass over it.

Then, Psalm 104:6–9 cites the boundaries God set for the waters as one of the many reasons to praise God for his creation:

[6] You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
 the waters stood above the mountains.
 [7] At your rebuke they fled;
 at the sound of your thunder they took to flight.
 [8] The mountains rose, the valleys sank down
 to the place that you appointed for them.
 [9] You set a boundary that they may not pass,
 so that they might not again cover the earth.

The flood of Noah, then, symbolizes great judgment, since God commands the waters to transgress these boundaries. Both “the fountains of the great deep burst forth,” transgressing the horizontal boundaries, and “the windows of the heavens were opened,” transgressing the vertical boundaries (Gen. 7:11). The subsiding of the flood will be essentially an act of new creation as God reinstates those boundaries: “The fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were closed, the rain from the heavens was restrained, and the waters receded from the earth continually” (Gen. 8:2–3).

Through the rest of the Bible, the motif of separated waters will symbolize both God’s judgment and God’s salvation. For example, God parts the Red Sea in Exodus 14 to allow the Israelites to escape the Egyptians by crossing over on dry land. Then, God stops up the Jordan River in Joshua 3–4 to allow the Israelites to cross into the land of Canaan. When Jesus stills the waves and the storms by his voice, he demonstrates that he is the God who assigns boundaries to the waters (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). Baptism captures both the judgment and the salvation aspect of the symbolism by picturing the way that God preserves his people (like Noah and his family) through the surrounding judgment of the flood (1 Pet. 3:20). Ultimately, the seas will be banished forever from the new heavens and new earth in the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1).

The Goodness of God’s Order

God’s creation, then, is orderly. The darkness is separated from the light, and the waters are separated vertically by the expanse of the sky and horizontally by the creation of dry land. By separating, forming, and ordering his creation, God transforms his dark, formless, watery creation into something that is “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10). In part, this act of forming his creation prepares it for the heavenly bodies, plants, animals, and (most importantly) people who would inhabit it. By separating between night and day, and by creating dry land that the seas could not cover, God built

the infrastructure for a world that human beings could inhabit.

More importantly, by forming his creation, the author of Genesis 1 “is building a case for the importance of obedience to the will of God.”¹² The forming, separation, and order that God created are good. Therefore, God demonstrates that he both values distinctions and that he will eventually demand that his *people* value the distinctions that he makes. As Gordon Wenham observes:

Separation is one of the central ideas in this chapter. God separates darkness and light, upper and lower waters, day and night (vv 6, 7, 14, 18). Elsewhere separation almost becomes synonymous with divine election (Lev 20:24; Num 8:14; Deut 4:41; 10:8; 1 Kgs 8:53). And Israel is expected to become as discriminating as her LORD in distinguishing between clean and unclean, holy and profane (Lev 10:10; 20:25).¹³

Of course, we find similar commandments in the New Testament that God’s people should “come out and be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17); however, in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the firstfruits of the new creation, our call to be separate in this world is an *ethical* command, not a physical command. Like Jesus, we are to reach out in love to sinners, but to be separate by our *conduct*.¹⁴

If we recognize that God both created and structured creation, then we should obey all that God commands us to do *within* his creation. God alone can tell us the best way to live in that creation. When we live according to the instruction God gives, we order our lives after God’s order, according to true wisdom and for the sake of true flourishing. When we do *not* live according to the instruction God gives, however, we cut across the grain of God’s good, orderly creation. Departing from God’s structures does not afford us life-giving freedom; rather, we end up dead and enslaved. Part of the lie of sin is that *we* can establish *more* order for our lives than God can. We believe that we know better than God does about what will bring more peace, security, prosperity, flourishing, and blessings. Faith means, in part, that we judge God’s own wisdom as being above our own. Accordingly, walking by faith means that we must defer to God’s wisdom in favor of our own. In this way, we learn to love what God loves, to choose what he chooses, and to live according to God’s wisdom, in line with the original goodness of creation.

Filling the Void (Gen. 1:11–31)

At this point, creation is largely *formed*, but entirely *unfilled*. That is, God has addressed with three of the four major characteristics of the Genesis 1:2 creation that kept the initial heavens and earth from being “good”: God has (1) given form to the formless by (2) separating light from the darkness and (3) separating dry land from the waters. While there is still one more important element of “separation” that has to do with forming time (Gen. 1:14–19), the remainder of the creation story deals with how God corrects the emptiness (“void”; Gen. 1:2) of creation by filling the world with an extraordinary range of plants, heavenly bodies, creatures, and human beings.

Filling the Dry Ground

During the first part of the third day, God separated the waters from the dry land. During the remainder of the third day, God accomplishes his first act of *filling* by causing vegetation to grow on

that dry land:

And God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. (Gen. 1:11–13)

The language is beautiful in Hebrew, with repetitions of words piled up. We might render a more literal translation this way: “Let the sprouts sprout! Let the herbs’ seeds seed! Let the fruit tree be fruitful—after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth” (Gen. 1:11). Then, the statement in Genesis 1:12 echoes God’s command, indicating that everything proceeds just as God spoke. Once all the vegetation is in place, God evaluates this new aspect of creation as “good” (Gen. 1:12).

Notably, God continues his work of *forming* even as he begins his work of *filling* the creation. We do not read about haphazard, uncontrolled overgrowth, but the phrase “according to its kind” appears three times in these verses, and the somewhat awkward language of the “fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed” appears two times. These phrases explain that the vegetation of God’s creation will grow and reproduce in accordance with its own species. The plants will yield seed to reproduce their species, and the fruit of the fruit trees will serve as seed for reproducing those species of fruit trees. When Jesus observed that “each tree is known by its fruit” (Luke 6:44), he was describing the human heart with creation imagery. Just as each fruit tree bears fruit in which is its seed, so also the words and deeds of human beings reveal the kind of seed that lives in them (cf. 1 John 3:9), whether to bear good fruit or bad fruit (Luke 6:43–45).

Filling the Heavens

On the fourth day, God makes the lights in the heavens:

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. (Gen. 1:14–19)

The creation of the heavenly lights does indeed fill the skies, but God also uses these lights for organizing his creation. So, God uses these lights to “separate” the day from the night—and not only to separate days, but as signs to separate seasons and years as well (Gen. 1:14). Just as God created the expanse on the second day to divide space (i.e., the waters under the expanse from the waters above the expanse; Gen. 1:7), so God also creates these lights to divide time. Although God’s act of creating light on the first day divided time between night and day in some way (Gen. 1:5), Genesis 1:14–19 describe a more complete organization of time in God’s creation. Of course, the culmination of

God's good ordering of time will come on the seventh day, which God will set apart forever as a day of rest (Gen. 2:1–3). Beyond this, the *seasons*, *days*, and *years* are words that correspond to Israel's festal calendar (cf. Lev. 23).¹⁵

Filling the Waters Under and Above the Expanse

On the fifth day, God begins to create animals:

And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. (Gen. 1:20–23)

We should notice that God begins his filling of the earth with the animals that would swim in the seas and fly in the air. It will not be until the sixth day that God creates the animals that will dwell on dry land, including everything that "creeps on the ground," livestock, and human beings (Gen. 1:24–31). Most likely, this sequence suggests that God is "filling" his creation with animals in the order that he organized the creation. God first separated the waters below the expanse from the waters above the expanse (Gen. 1:6–8) before he separated the waters on the earth from the dry ground (Gen. 1:9–10).

Additionally, God *blesses* these animals by commanding them to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill the waters and the earth (Gen. 1:22), and he declares these animals to be good (Gen. 1:22). The phrase "according to its kind" appears here in Genesis 1:21, just as we saw three times in relation to the vegetation on the dry ground (Gen. 1:11–13). As with vegetation, each species of the animal kingdom will reproduce according to its kind in order to continue *filling* creation according to the *form* that God has established.

Filling the Earth with Image-Bearers

In many ways, the sixth day continues God's work of *filling* his creation. God calls forth the living creatures who will walk on dry land in much the same way that he called forth living creatures to swarm in the waters and to fill the heavens. These land creatures include "livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds" (Gen. 1:24). Then, after creating these animals, we read again that "God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:25). So far, the sixth day follows all the patterns that we have observed throughout God's work of creation in the world. But during the remainder of the sixth day in Genesis 1:26–31, God continues his work of filling the earth by creating something unique in all of his creation: human beings.

The text communicates at least three ways that the creation of human beings is a different from how God created everything else. First, God does not create human beings with the typical language he has used up to this point, "Let there be...." Instead, God says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).¹⁶ By switching from third person language ("Let there be") to first person language ("Let us make"), God speaks in a way that expresses a closer relationship to this creature than to the other creatures that fill his creation. God's process for creating "man" (including

males and females; Gen. 1:27) is more intimate way his process for creating anything else in the heavens and the earth.

Second, God deliberately creates man “in our image, after our likeness.” Once again, this language reflects a significant difference between the man and the rest of creation. God does not create anything else in his express image and likeness. Furthermore, every other plant and creature has explicitly been created “after its kind,” while the “human likeness is not simply of himself and herself; they also share a likeness to their Creator.”¹⁷ The idea of the “image of God” plays such an important role here not only in differentiating the human beings from the rest of the creatures, but also in establishing a connection with God. Still, the text of Genesis does not clearly define the “image of God.” Biblical scholars have spilled untold amounts of ink attempting to define “the image of God,” and exploring that scholarship fully would go beyond the scope of this book. Instead, we will simply pass along the concise summary that Allen Ross writes:

The term “image” has been variously explained as personality, nature (as body and spirit), or capacity for moral decision. It does not signify a physical representation of corporeality, for God is a spirit. The term must therefore figuratively describe human life as a reflection of God’s spiritual nature; that is, human life has the communicated attributes that came with the inbreathing (Gen. 2:7). Consequently, humans have spiritual life, ethical and moral sensitivities, conscience, and the capacity to represent God. The significance of the word “image” should be connected to the divine purpose for human life.¹⁸

We will spend more time reflecting on the original nature of human beings before the fall in the next chapter when we study Genesis 2.

Third, God gives man dominion over the rest of creation: “And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth...Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:26, 28). Then, God gives the plants as food to man (Gen. 1:29) and to the animals (Gen. 1:30). By this, God establishes a hierarchy of authority on the earth. Plants are at the bottom, given for food to animals and humans alike. Man at the top, possessing authority and dominion over the animals as well as a commission to fill the earth and subdue it.

The Blessing of Man

As with the animals (Gen. 1:22), God blesses “them” (Gen. 1:28)—that is, the man and the woman. As he blesses them, he instructs them to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” and, in distinction from the animals, to “subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” God’s two acts of creation were to form and to fill, and now God directs the human beings to share in that same work. By their fruitfulness and multiplication, the human beings will “fill the earth.” By their subduing and exercising dominion over the other creatures, they will sustain and further the *forming* work of God in creation.

Then, before the close of the sixth day, we read not only that everything in creation was good, but that it was “very good.” While this addition of “very” is likely a description of the goodness of

humanity who was created in the image of God, it is also an overall description of the filling and organizing of God’s “very good” creation, since on the seventh day, God rests from his work of creation.

The Goodness of God’s Filling

By this point, God’s creation is both *formed* and *filled*. Everywhere, God’s creation is teeming with vegetation and animals, without any sense of poverty, incompleteness, or lack. This does not mean that the whole face of creation is *entirely* full or on the verge of overcrowding. Rather, God has set his great work of *filling* the heavens into earth in motion. The vegetation will continue to sprout and seed “according to its kind.” The animals will be fruitful and multiply to fill the seas, the skies, and the earth. Most importantly, God’s image-bearers will be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and exercising dominion over the rest of creation. All this is not only good, but *very* good.

Still, just as Satan tempts us to question the goodness of God’s *form*, so also Satan tempts us to question whether God will sufficiently *fill* our lives. Is God withholding something good for us? The story of creation rejects that possibility entirely. God does not withhold, but he gives generously. When Satan offers us something that seems good, he is lying to us. God is the creator of all good things, so that Satan has nothing of his own to tempt us. Rather, Satan can only offer us corruptions of God’s good, full gifts, by tempting us to steal what God intended for goodness and fullness “at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden.”¹⁹ What God intends for pleasure, joy, and *fullness*, Satan twists toward pain, despair, and emptiness. That is, Satan seeks to return us to the *void* of creation in Genesis 1:2.

The great question of creation, then, is this: Will we trust God the Creator? Will we defer to his wisdom in creation, trusting him for *both* his purposes and his plenty? Will we allow awe of God’s glory to guide us into humble faith as we seek direction for our lives and provision for our needs? God the Creator is *good*. Can we trust him to be good for us?

Finishing the Work (Gen. 2:1–3)

We find last three verses of the Genesis 1 creation account in Genesis 2:

[1] Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. [2] And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. [3] So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation. (Gen. 2:1–23)

On the seventh day, God rests from the work that he has done. And yet, even though all the work of forming and filling the *space* of creation is complete, there is one more crucial element to relate. In a final act of organization, God blesses the seventh day and makes it holy. By setting apart the seventh day as holy, God commemorates the fact that he himself rested his work in creation on the seventh day. God does not provide further form to the *space* of creation, but to its *time*.

So, God “blessed” (Gen. 2:3) the time of the seventh day, declaring it to be “holy” (Gen. 2:3), or set apart for his own purposes. While the text of Genesis does not make it explicit, God will clarify in

the Ten Commandments that he requires his people to follow his example by resting from their work on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8–11). Additionally, there is some evidence that human beings set aside the seventh day as a Sabbath for worshiping God from very early on. When Cain and Abel bring offerings in worship before Yahweh, the phrase “in the course of time” (Gen. 4:3) may be translated more literally as “at the end of days,” perhaps meaning the end of the *week*, the seventh day.²⁰ This pattern of setting aside the Sabbath day for worship continues all the way until today as we worship on the Christian Sabbath, the first day of the week that commemorates the *new* creation that Christ inaugurated at his resurrection. As John Willison writes this:

For, if the perfecting the work of the first creation deserved to have a day set apart for celebrating the power and glory of the Author, much more doth the finishing the new creation, or restoration of the world, deserve a day to be consecrated for the commemoration of that, in regard the glorious attributes of God do shine far more brightly in this than in the other.²¹

The idea of *rest*, though, does not refer to “remedying exhaustion after a tiring week of work.”²² God is not worn out from his work; rather, his work over the previous six days was complete and perfect in every respect, so that he *ceased* from working any further. Our Sabbath rest, then, is not done as a work of righteousness to merit God’s favor. Rather, we *rest* from our work by faith that God is the one who sanctifies us (Ex. 31:13), bestowing favor upon us through his grace and lovingkindness in Christ. We experience this in part when we rest from our works through faith in Christ; however, the experience of Sabbath rest that we enjoy today is a pale shadow of what we stand to inherit in the new heavens and the new earth: “[9] So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, [10] for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his” (Heb. 4:10).

And with that, the fly-by picture of God’s work in creation is complete. God created the heavens and the earth, forming, filling, and finishing his creation’s space and time as a perfect place to dwell with his people. God has commissioned these human beings, who are made in his image, to carry forward his work of subduing and multiplying his creation into the future. In the next chapter, we will look at another angle on God’s work of creation. The account of creation in Genesis 2:4–25 does not contradict what we have read here in Genesis 1:1–2:3. Instead, the next account provides us supplemental and complementary information to expand our understanding of the *very goodness* of everything that God created.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God originally create the heavens and the earth as a formless, empty, dark, and watery mess (Gen. 1:2)? How does this depiction of the world before God makes it *good* illustrate the consequences of sin? Why are we so tempted to think that we understand how to pursue *goodness* in this world better than God, the Creator?
2. How many ways does God establish *form* to the formlessness of creation? Why does God consider form, structure, organization, order, and distinctions to be so important? Where are you grateful that

God has established boundaries in your life? Where do you most feel a pull away from God's boundaries? How does recognizing the *goodness* of God's structure help you to fight against temptation?

3. How many things does God create to *fill* the void of his creation? Why does God want his creation to be filled? What role are human beings called to play in filling up creation? How might the principle of *filling* influence our families or our work? How might our call to *subdue* and *exercise dominion* over creation influence our families or our work?

4. Why does God set aside the Sabbath day as holy? How does God call us to rest from our work on the Sabbath? How do you remember the Sabbath to keep it holy? In the context of the glorious goodness of God in creation, how might we start to see keeping the Sabbath as a delight rather than a drudgery?

Notes

1. In English, these two words correspond to “In the beginning” and “created.” Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Volume 1, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 14.

2. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 6.

3. On the points made in this paragraph, see John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 1–97.

4. Although these are the two general possibilities, Gordon Wenham provides four specific interpretive possibilities that commentators have offered over time:

“1. V 1 is a temporal clause subordinate to the main clause in v 2: “In the beginning when God created..., the earth was without form...”

2. V 1 is a temporal clause subordinate to the main clause in v 3 (v 2 is a parenthetical comment). “In the beginning when God created...(now the earth was formless) God said...”

3. V 1 is a main clause, summarizing all the events described in vv 2–31. It is a title to the chapter as a whole, and could be rendered “In the beginning God was the creator of heaven and earth.” What being creator of heaven and earth means is then explained in more detail in vv 2–31.

4. V 1 is a main clause describing the first act of creation. Vv 2 and 3 describe subsequent phases in God's creative activity.” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 11.)

5. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 128.

6. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 73–74. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.vii.i.html>>

7. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 85.

8. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 108.

9. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 18.

10. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 108.

11. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 89.

12. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 91.

13. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 18–19.

14. Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids:

Zondervan, 2005), 576–77.

15. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 28–31.

16. The use of the plural “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26 is fascinating, but we do not have space to address that issue fully. Victory Hamilton offers a wonderful insight into the plurality in the Godhead revealed here: “The best suggestion approaches the trinitarian understanding but employs less direct terminology. Thus Hasel calls the us of v. 26 a ‘plural of fullness,’ and Clines is close to that with his phrase ‘duality within the Godhead.’ According to Clines, God here speaks to the Spirit, mentioned back in v. 2, who now becomes God’s partner in creation. It is one thing to say that the author of Gen. 1 was not schooled in the intricacies of Christian dogma. It is another thing to say he was theologically too primitive or naïve to handle such ideas as plurality within unity. What we often so blithely dismiss as ‘foreign to the thought of the OT’ may be nothing of the sort. True, the concept may not be etched on every page of Scripture, but hints and clues are dropped enticingly here and there, and such hints await their full understanding ‘at the correct time’ (Gal. 4:4).” (Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 134.)

17. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 94.

18. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 112.

19. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 44.

20. John Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day* (Albany: J. Boardman, 1820), 36.

21. Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day*, 52.

22. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 113.