

Chapter 2: Humanity

Genesis 2:4–25

Who are we? What does it mean to be a human being? These are fundamental questions that touch on every aspect of our existence, and they have been answered variously throughout history. To some, we are gods, or at least united to the pantheist deity. To others, we are groveling worms before a tyrannical god. To still others, we are the accidental products of gas explosions, spontaneous life-generation, and a series of fortunate mutations. To yet others, we are nothing more than our feelings, hormones, and experiences.

According to the Bible, human beings are fundamentally unique in all of creation. Furthermore, we embody a complex set of paradoxes. So, we are created from the dust, but despite our humble origins, we are created in the very image of God himself. Then, while the curse of human sin has caused our labor to become toil painful, sweat-filled toil to bring fruit out of the dust, we nevertheless exercise dignity and nobility in our work. Additionally, while our marriages are torn by strife, infidelity, and divorce, our marriage relationships nevertheless reflect (however dimly) a sacred mystery: the marriage of Christ and his church. We are simultaneously glorious and shameful, majestic and depraved, hopeful and despondent. How does all of this fit together?

Unless we understand what we were created to be, we will never understand who we are. The entry of sin into the world will wreak havoc on our original nature, but we cannot see the nature and the extent of the damage of the Fall without fully appreciating the baseline starting point of creation. Also, we must fully appreciate our original glory if we wish to understand the nature of the glory that Jesus Christ came to restore. Throughout the whole Bible, Genesis 2:4–25 stands as the most important reflection on human nature, human work, and human marriage—where we began, and where we are going.

Human Nature (Gen. 2:4–7)

This second creation story in Genesis does not provide a different history of creation. Rather, this is the *same* history, but written from a different perspective. The differences between the two perspectives are reflected even in the names used to describe God in each account. The first story gave a fly-by account of how the almighty Creator “God” (*'elohîm*) created the world in six days. This second story, by contrast, gives a close-up perspective on how the covenantal Lord “Yahweh God” (*YHWH 'elohîm*) carefully formed the man, placed the man in the Garden of Eden, commissioned him for work, and built the woman out of the man’s rib to become a suitable companion for him. Where the first account demonstrated the power and authority of God to create the heavens and the earth in six days, the second account shows the intimate, personal relationship between Yahweh God and his image-bearers. After Genesis 2, it seems that this intimacy is largely lost, since the name “Yahweh God” appears only once more in the Pentateuch (Ex. 9:30), and around

twenty times elsewhere in the rest of the Old Testament.¹

The second creation begins with the phrase, “These are the generations of (*tôledôt*) the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 2:4). This is the first of ten “These are the generations of...” statements that we will read in the book of Genesis.² In each case, these statements begin a story of the outcome of one person’s lineage and descendants after him; here, however, we read not about the generations of a person, but about the generations of the heavens and the earth, which the first account told us that God had created “in the beginning” (Gen. 1:1). Additionally, the text of Genesis invariably introduces the person *before* we read his “These are the generations of...” So, the author of Genesis introduces Noah in Genesis 6:8, and then we read “These are the generations of Noah” in Genesis 6:9. Similarly, we meet Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth in Genesis 6:10, but we read their “generations” in Genesis 10:1. In the same way, the narrator has already introduced us to the “heavens and the earth” in Genesis 1:1–2:3 before we now read, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth...” in Genesis 2:4. This opening line demonstrates continuity between the two stories rather than setting them up as rivals.

The Chronology of Genesis 1–2

Nevertheless, the chronology between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 is a bit tricky, since Genesis 2 at first appears to suggest that there was no vegetation on the earth when God created the man: “When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground...” (Gen. 2:5–7). If that were the case, then the perspective of creation recorded in Genesis 2 would contradict Genesis 1, where vegetation first appears on the earth on the third day (Gen. 1:11–13), while human beings do not appear until the sixth day of creation (Gen. 1:26–31). This supposed contradiction, however, is only apparent, since these two accounts do not contradict each other. Instead, a close study of the text both unravels the apparent contradiction, and, more importantly, helps us to understand God’s original purposes for human beings.

The key observation that helps us to correlate these two texts is to recognize that, in Genesis 1:11, God commanded that the “earth” (*hā’āreṣ*) should sprout two categories of “vegetation” (*deše*): (1) “plants yielding seed” (*‘ēšeb mazrî*), and (2) “fruit trees” (*‘ēṣ pēri*).³ In both cases, the “plants yielding seed” and the “fruit trees” are terms that describe the way in which they grow—through self-propagation by their own “seed” or “fruit” so that they reproduce “according to their own kinds” (Gen. 1:11, 12 (x2)). These plants would grow in the “earth” on their own without any need of cultivation.⁴

An entirely different set of plants are described in Genesis 2:5. Here, we are told that two different kinds of plants have not grown yet: the “bush of the field” (*šiaḥ hasādeh*) and the “small plant of the field” (*‘ēšeb hasādeh*). Importantly, these plants grow in “the field,” and not generally on “the earth.” Additionally, they are not self-reproducing “according to their own kinds.” The narrator tells us two specific reasons that these plants had not yet grown: (1) there was no rain yet, and (2) there was no man to “work the ground” (Gen. 2:5–6). These two explanations foreshadow the coming curse of sin, since rain comes first with the flood of Noah (Gen. 7:11–12), and since the man’s

responsibility to “work the ground” comes only as a result of the curse of sin and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23).⁵ In other words, the reason that the “bush of the field” and the “small plant of the field” have not grown yet is that sin has not yet entered the world.

Furthermore, the phrase “plants of the field” shows up again during the curse Yahweh God will put on Adam after the Fall: “cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the *plants of the field*” (Gen. 3:17–18). Most likely, then, the “bush” (Gen. 2:5) is another way of describing the “thorns and thistles” (Gen. 3:18) that will grow as weeds because of the curse, while the “plants of the field” are the cultivated plants that human beings will need to grow for food after they are cut off from the bounty of the Garden of Eden.⁶ While God has brought forth good, food-producing vegetation on the third day in Genesis 1, the curse of sin will cause cursed vegetation to grow (the “bush of the field”) and will force human beings to work the ground to produce plants of the field for their food. Probably, the Fall was also the cause of the end of the “mist” that formerly watered “the whole face of the ground” (Gen. 2:5), which created the need for artificial irrigation to grow crops in a world under the curse of sin.⁷

Why does the author of Genesis open this second creation story with a description of the painful, toiling work in the dirt to raise a meager amount of food from the small plant of the field in the midst of the thorny, thistle-filled bushes? Most likely, the narrator is setting a contrast to the nature of work and the abundance of food before and after the introduction of sin into the world. In Genesis 2:15, we discover that God indeed gives the man work to do, but not toiling work. Furthermore, God gives the man food in abundance from every tree of the garden except one (Gen. 2:16–17). Genesis 2:5–6 functions, then, introduces the story of the creation of the human being by describing the world as it used to be: fertile, bountiful, and not cursed by the “bush of the field” or in need of agricultural labor to grow the “plants of the field” for food.

Human Nature

In the world that was, we can see what God originally created human nature to be. Often when we speak of *human nature*, we mean something more like *sinful* human nature. In fact, we should always differentiate the *sinfulness* of human beings from their original nature, since we were not originally created with sin. Instead, sin is a corruption of our original nature as creatures made in the image of God from the dust of the ground. Genesis 1:26–30 stressed the regal nature of human beings by virtue of our being created in the image of God, but Genesis 2 stresses two different aspects of Yahweh God’s creation of human beings: (1) Yahweh God’s artistic and intimate posture in creating the man, and (2) the man’s creation out of the dust.

Genesis 1 did not give us any information about how God created human beings. Genesis 2 fills out our information gap by writing, “...then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). Specifically, when the text says that Yahweh God “formed” the man out of the dust from the ground, the verb (*yāšar*) is a word that describes artistry, and it is commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to the work of a potter crafting pottery (e.g., 1 Chron. 4:23; Isa. 64:8). The man was the workmanship of Yahweh God (cf. Eph. 2:10), and he is called “Adam” since, in Hebrew, the word for “man” is *’ādām*.

Additionally, the fact that man was formed out of the dust of the ground is significant for two

reasons. First, Victor Hamilton points out that through the rest of the Old Testament, the idea of “exaltation from dust” carries a wide range of meanings, including being “elevated to royal office [1 Kgs. 16:2], to rise above poverty [1 Sam. 2:8; Ps. 113:7], to find life [Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2].”⁸ These images of being lifted up from the dust allude back to Genesis 2, where the first man was formed like pottery from the dust of the ground by Yahweh God to exercise dominion over the whole earth as God’s image-bearer. But second, the man’s origins in dust foreshadow his grim future, since after the Fall, he will be cursed to return to the dust in death (Gen. 3:19). Between the time of man’s beginning from the dust and his end of returning to the dust, he will be doomed to work the dusty ground in toil and sweat to cultivate plants for food out of its thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17–19). The dust out of which the man is formed speaks to every part of his existence, from beginning to end, which is why Paul calls Adam “a man of dust” and his offspring “those who are of the dust” in 1 Corinthians 15:47–48.

Finally, we discover in Genesis 2:7 the reason for the man’s differentiation from the animals: Yahweh God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The phrase, “the man became a living creature” does not differentiate him from the other animals, since Genesis applies the same expression to those other animals (e.g., Gen. 2:19). Furthermore, the idea of Yahweh God’s “forming” the man does not, on its own, differentiate the man from animals, since we will later read in Genesis 2:19 that Yahweh God had also “formed” (*yāšar*) the animals out of the ground. But of no other animal whatsoever do we read of Yahweh so intimately inbreathing the breath of life, which probably suggests that this “breath of life” is what constitutes the man as the image and likeness of God.⁹

Inbreathed Pottery of Dust

The creation story of Genesis 2 underscores what Genesis 1 made plain: God created everything for human beings to enjoy and to rule. The human beings are the capstone of Yahweh God’s creation, the pinnacle of his accomplishments, and the careful work of his artistry as his image-bearers. We are beloved sons (and, as we will see later in the passage, daughters) of Yahweh God, the artisan creator of the heavens and the earth. We share a dignity unmatched by any other part of creation as the objects of Yahweh God’s affections, a dignity that cannot be diminished or enhanced on the basis of race, ability, disability, birth, money, intellect, language, or any other factor. Human life is inherently, fundamentally, and unalterably sacred.

And yet, the language of Genesis 2 also prevents us from having too high of an opinion of ourselves in two ways: (1) by capturing the humble origins of man from the dust, and (2) through ominously foreshadowing the man’s future of toiling in the dust and returning to the dust after falling into sin. This perfect, pristine existence was reality once, but no longer. We now live in a day when the thorns and thistles of the bushes of the field crowd out the cultivated plants that we must toil to grow for our own food. We are glorious, and yet we are dust. Human life is sacred, and yet human life is fragile by nature and broken by sin. This contradiction between our glory and our corruption will not be fully addressed until the cross, and this tension of our weakness as “those of the dust” will not be transformed until the return of Christ when we shall be renewed in our nature to be like him. As Paul writes, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49). Today we share Adam’s limitations; tomorrow we will share Christ’s glory.

Human Work (Gen. 2:8–17)

Yahweh God does not create humans merely to exist, but also to work. Certainly, Yahweh God does not originally burden the man with the cursed, sweaty toil of working the thorny and thistle-filled dust that all humankind will endure after the Fall. Nevertheless, Yahweh God creates the man with a functional purpose in mind: to work and to keep his Garden.

The Garden of Eden

After forming the man out of the dust, Yahweh God plants a garden in Eden where the man will dwell (Gen. 2:8). In that garden, Yahweh God causes to grow every tree that is “pleasant” to the sight and “good” for food (Gen. 2:9). The word for “pleasant” (*neḥmād*) might also be translated as “desirable,” and it is the same word used in the tenth commandment not to “covet” anything of one’s neighbor (Ex. 20:17). This word, along with the phrase “good for food,” are used again in Genesis 3:6, when the woman, against the commandment of Yahweh, independently judges the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to be “good for food” and “desired [*neḥmād*] to make one wise.” Here in Genesis 2:9, we are told that man was given unlimited “good” and “pleasant” food from every other tree in the garden. Therefore, our first parents’ rebellion to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil did not arise out of deprivation, but from deliberate sin.

It is in this context that we read about the existence of two trees in the midst of the garden: “the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:9). Derek Kidner is probably right to describe these trees not as magical, but as “sacramental, in the broad sense of the word, in that they are the physical means of a spiritual transaction.”¹⁰ God’s word governs the effects of eating the physical fruit of these two trees, both with a promise in the tree of life, and with a warning in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is not merely by eating fruit that the man will live or die, but through his obedience or disobedience of Yahweh God’s commandment.

Next, we read that the garden not only includes trees, but that “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers” (Gen. 2:10). We should make three observations from this verse. First, we should note that “Eden” and “the garden” are distinguished from each other, so that the river flows out of Eden to water the garden; however, the narrator earlier described the garden as being “in Eden” (Gen. 2:8). The garden, then, is both *in* a wider region called “Eden,” but the garden also is *not* Eden proper. This observation will become important later.

Second, a river out of Eden first waters the garden, and then breaks into four rivers that water the whole earth. The river flowing out of Eden is not like the formless waters (Gen. 1:2) that God had to organize on the second and third days of creation (Gen. 1:6–10). Instead, these are waters that flow to give life to the whole earth. We find this imagery of life-giving water flowing out from Eden again in Ezekiel 47. There, the prophet foresees a new temple with water flowing out of it that will cause the salty waters of the sea to become fresh (Eze. 47:9, 11), leading to life-giving growth and abundance.¹¹ Eventually, Jesus himself will declare that *he* will cause living waters to spring out of the (dead) hearts of his people (John 7:37–39), and ultimately, the new Jerusalem will have a river of life flowing out from the midst of the city (Rev. 22:1–2) for the healing of the nations. Remember, the new heavens and the new earth will no longer contain the formless seas (Rev. 21:1). This river of life

will again water the tree of life, whose bountiful fruit and leaves that are for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2).

Third, as the narrator describes the course of the waters flowing out from Eden, we read in Genesis 2:11–12 about precious stones in these areas, including gold, bdellium, and onyx stone. These precious stones befit the glorious presence of God.¹² So, we should not be surprised to see gold and onyx used in the construction of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:15–21). All that was lost from Eden at the Fall is regained in the new creation, never to be lost again.

Cultivating and Keeping

Now that the stage is set for *where* the man will work, we can discover *what* the man will do in his work: “And the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). There are three words in this verse that we need to explore to help us fill out what isn’t obvious in translation: (1) “put,” (2) “to work it,” and (3) “to keep it.”

Significantly, the word “put” is a different word than the standard word for “put” or “place” that we found in Genesis 2:8, “...and there [the garden in Eden] he *put* the man whom he had formed.” Instead, this word for “put” in Genesis 2:15 is related to the word for “rest” (*núah*).¹³ We might, then, clarify the translation of Genesis 2:15 by putting it this way: “And Yahweh God took the man and *caused him to rest* in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” This is why the absence of any “bush of the field” and no “plants of the field” (Gen. 2:5) is so important: God never intended for the man to “work the ground” (Gen. 3:23) by the sweat of his brow to cultivate those kinds of plants. Yahweh God did not create the man to be a toiling farmer, but to do another kind of *restful* work.

What, then, is the nature of the *restful* work that Adam was given? We are told that Yahweh put him in the Garden of Eden “to work it and to keep it.”¹⁴ Instead of sweaty, laborious toil, something different is in view here. Certainly, Adam was called to cultivate the garden in some way, but his work represented far more than that. In fact, the chief purpose of Adam’s work is to serve as the first priest of God in the first temple of God on the earth. Let’s work through these words to understand what this passage is teaching us about Adam’s work.

The first word, “to work it,” uses the verb *‘abad*, which can mean “work,” “cultivate,” “serve,” or, significantly, “worship,” if the one being “served” is God. The second word, “to keep it,” uses the verb *šamar*, which can mean “keep,” “guard,” or “obey.” In the first word, then, Yahweh God commissions the man to “cultivate” the garden, but to do so in a way that would also “worship” his God. In the second word, Yahweh God instructed the man to guard the purity of the garden, ensuring that nothing evil, unclean, detestable, or false should ever enter into it (cf. Rev. 21:27)—such as the serpent who questioned Yahweh God’s law in Genesis 3.¹⁵ By cultivating and keeping the garden, the man was worshipping and obeying Yahweh God himself. After the Fall, these words occur again with tragic irony, so that man is now called to “work” the (cursed) ground (Gen. 3:23), and Yahweh God places cherubim with a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden of Eden to “guard” the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). No longer will the man serve Yahweh in the garden, but he will *toil* over the cursed ground from which he will eat, and Yahweh’s cherubim will *guard* the tree of life from the man.

These two words continue to appear together in the rest of the Bible with great significance. G. K. Beale writes:

The two Hebrew words for ‘cultivate and keep’ are usually translated ‘serve and guard [or keep]’ elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is true that the Hebrew word usually translated ‘cultivate’ can refer to an agricultural task when used by itself (e.g., 2:5; 3:23). When, however, these two words (verbal [*‘abad* and *šamar*] and nominal forms) occur together in the Old Testament (within an approximately 15-word range), they refer either to Israelites ‘serving’ God and ‘guarding [keeping]’ God’s word (approximately 10 times) or to priests who ‘keep’ the service’ (or ‘charge’) of the tabernacle (see Num. 3:7–8; 8:25–26; 18:5–6; 1 Chr. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14).¹⁶

In other words, these are priestly words. They refer to the priestly work of worship (sacrifice and prayer) and the priestly guard-duty of obeying and observing God’s commandments (cf. Gen. 2:16), especially by keeping uncleanness and evil separated from God’s dwelling place in his temple (cf. Num. 3:10, 25–26, 31–32, 36–37, 38).

Adam’s priesthood helps us to recognize something else that we haven’t quite recognized fully through our study of Genesis 2 thus far: the garden of Eden is more than a garden, but a *temple*. As Beale summarizes it, “the Garden of Eden was the first archetypal temple in which the first man worshipped God.”¹⁷ Specifically, it seems that the garden is the the Holy Place immediately outside of the *Most* Holy Place where Yahweh alone dwells—that is, the antechamber of Eden.¹⁸ (Remember, we observed above that the garden is *connected* to Eden, but that Eden is *distinct* from the garden.) Later on in the temple, the Most Holy Place where the ark of the covenant dwells will be just beyond the antechamber of the Holy Place, which was filled with garden imagery such as carvings and designs of gourds and open flowers (1 Kgs. 6:18), palm trees (1 Kgs. 6:29, 32), pomegranates (1 Kgs. 7:20), and lilies (1 Kgs. 7:22).¹⁹ Also inside the antechamber of the Holy Place will be the lampstand and the bread of the Presence. The lampstand will be fashioned in the shape of a tree to symbolize the tree of life, and the bread of the Presence will provide food to the priests in the same way that Yahweh God had fed Adam, the first priest, from the fruit in the original temple’s antechamber in the garden of Eden.²⁰ These connections with the temple also help us to understand further the rather odd inclusion of information about the precious stones in the area surrounding Eden, since gold, onyx, and other precious stones were included in the temple, and in the priestly clothing (cf. Ex. 25:7, 25:11–39, 28:9–12, 28:20; 1 Kgs. 6:20–22; 1 Chron. 29:2).²¹

Knowing all this, what kind of work does Yahweh actually give to Adam here? We find one aspect of the “keeping” that Adam was to do in the next verse, where Yahweh gives Adam a commandment to keep: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). To be a priest is to be a keeper of the law; Adam’s law was not extensive, but keeping it was a matter of life and death, as Adam and Eve will discover to their horror in the next chapter.

But what about the phrase, “to work it”? In what way would Adam “work” the garden if he wasn’t called to farm the ground in sweaty toil? In my mind, John Walton’s explanation most plausibly explains what is in view here, so I will quote him at length:

It is necessary, however, to move beyond the “serving and preserving” role. If people were going to fill the earth, we must conclude that they were not intended to stay in the garden in

a static situation. Yet moving out of the garden would appear a hardship since the land outside the garden was not as hospitable as that inside the garden (otherwise the garden would not be distinguishable). Perhaps, then, we should surmise that people were gradually supposed to extend the garden as they went about subduing and ruling. Extending the garden would extend the food supply as well as extend sacred space (Since that is what the garden represented).

In this regard it is possible to conclude that the inclusion of where the rivers went (2:11–14) is intended to indicate some of the resources that would eventually be at humankind's disposal as they worked their way out from the garden. Gold, spices, and precious stones all found their most common functions within sacred space, and these could be procured for that purpose as the garden was expanded.²²

If Adam and Eve had not sinned, all of human history might have been a restful cultivation of the garden of Eden to extend its boundaries, so that the original temple of God would have stretched out to support the ever-expanding number of the image-bearers of God. In this way, the whole earth would have eventually been filled with God's glory (cf. Isa. 6:3).²³

Human Work

To some degree, the glory of God *has* filled the whole earth, even though our work has been unrestful toil because of the curse of sin. First, we continue to “work” (serve/cultivate) the earth through our various vocations, expanding the fabric of the economy to support more image bearers. Whether we labor in the soil, or manufacture a product, or sell those crops/products, or raise children, our work expands the capacity of this world to support human life. Through our production, we support others; through the rewards of the fruit of our work, we support ourselves—whether by a paycheck we bring home or by the direct cultivation of our own homes and families. In this way, God works out his own providential care for his creation through our work, so that through our work, we become the “fingers of God” that continue God's providential work of *filling* what remains empty in his creation.²⁴

Second, we continue to “keep” (guard/obey) God's creation by working to establish God's goodness and to thwart Satan's evil in this world. Whether we write/enforce laws, or create art, or shepherd a church, or educate children, or manage our homes, our work creates systems and structures and capacities for human life to flourish in obedience to God and his word. Our work, then, not only continues God's work of filling what remains empty in God's creation, but also performs the critical work of *organizing* and *re-forming* what remains formless in God's creation.²⁵

Work, however, is not *only* creation care. In one sense, our work continues to be priestly in service to Yahweh God, even if the Fall has blurred the direct nature of how our work worships God. The Apostle Paul tells us directly that we do not “work” first and foremost for the benefit of our employers, but for God: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). The idea of “work” from Genesis 2:15 tells us *whom* we serve in our labor, for when we sow or reap or build or repair or sell or service to fill the earth, we directly serve the Lord Christ as he reigns over his creation.

Additionally, the idea of “keep” tells us something of *how* we serve God in our work. God's laws

give us a framework of how to go about our efforts ethically and in righteousness. Our work must serve others in some way (even if we feel that we serve a very small niche) rather than exploiting others. Neither money nor achievements nor fame nor anything short of the glory of God himself must guide and structure our work. And even within the organizations where we serve, this rich word “keep” points us toward the best principles of leadership and management to guide our internal efforts for the blessing of our co-workers, who are also created in the image of God.²⁶ Sin has indeed ruined the perfect work that Yahweh God originally commissioned Adam to do, but our work continues to have dignity and purpose nevertheless.²⁷

Human Marriage (Gen. 2:18–25)

After the sevenfold repetition of “And God saw that it was good” from Genesis 1, it is shocking to discover something in God’s perfect creation that is *not* good: “Then the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’” (Gen. 2:18). After parading every animal before the man without finding a suitable helper, Yahweh God eventually creates a woman and gives her to the man in marriage. In the last part of our passage, we see further information about the relationship of the man to the animals, as well as the unique marriage relationship of the man to his “fit helper,” the woman.

Dominion Over the Animals

The discussion of the creation of the animals in Genesis 2:19 raises another question regarding the chronologies of the two creation accounts, since all the animals were created on the fifth day and the first part of the sixth day before God created man in Genesis 1:20–30. In Genesis 2, however, the man is created before these animals. More plausibly, Genesis 2:19 is providing background information of what has *already* happened rather than expressing something that happened *after* or *as a consequence* of Yahweh God’s identifying the man’s need for a helper. In fact, the ESV adjusted its translation of this passage over time to reflect this interpretation. The earlier editions of the ESV, then, translated this phrase to suggest a sequence of action: “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field...” The later editions, on the other hand, ultimately changed their translation of this passage to present this verse as background information: “Now out of the ground the LORD God had formed every beast of the field...” The Hebrew text could support either translation, but the context strongly supports reading this verse as background information.

More importantly, this passage explores the similarity and dissimilarity between animals and human beings. While animals in many ways resemble human beings, the text reflects a sharp difference between the two in the fact that Adam can find no animal qualified to serve as his fit helper. Adam names the animals in Genesis 2:19–20 in accordance with the dominion that God had given human beings over the animals (Gen. 1:28), but they are not equals, and none of the animals is “fit” for Adam. In order to find Adam a fit helper, Yahweh God must create something new.

A Fit Helper

Therefore, Yahweh God causes a deep sleep to fall upon Adam. While the man sleeps, Yahweh God takes one of his ribs and “builds” a woman out of that rib. When Yahweh God brings the woman to the man, Adam immediately recognizes the fitness of this helper, exclaiming, “This at last

is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (Gen. 2:23). Unlike all of the animals he named, this woman (whom he also names here) corresponds to him in a fitting way. Because she is his equal, made to correspond to him, she can become his helper in a way that no animal could.

But what does the text mean when it describes the woman as the man’s “helper”? Is she his lowly subordinate, the assistant tasked with doing whatever he desires? Not hardly. Through the rest of the Bible, the word for “helper” (*‘ezer*) is used primarily to describe *Yahweh’s* own relationship to his people, Israel. As Allen Ross writes:

In that way it will soon become apparent that “helper” is not a demeaning term. God is usually the one described as the “helper” (Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7; 1 Sam. 7:12; Ps. 20:2; 46:1). The word essentially describes one who provides what is lacking in the man, who can do what the man alone cannot do. (The Septuagint translated the word with *boēthos*, which elsewhere describes a physician.) The man was thus created in such a way that he needs the help of a partner. Or we may say that human beings cannot fulfill their destiny except in mutual assistance.²⁸

Hamilton even goes so far as to observe that, in the Scriptures, *Yahweh* “is Israel’s help(er) because he is the stronger one (see, e.g., Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; Ps. 33:20; 115:9–11; 124:8; 146:5; etc).”²⁹ There is no hint of inferiority, and, in fact, we see from the beginning that the woman is given to the man not because of *her* weakness, but because of *his*. Quite simply, the woman has capabilities that the man does not have. She complements him, making up for what the man, on his own, lacks—and *vice versa*. We should recall what we read in the previous chapter, that it is the man and the woman who *together* exist as the image of God (Gen. 1:27). God blessed them together, and they can only be fruitful to multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, having dominion over the rest of creation *together* (Gen. 1:28).

Now, this does not mean that the man and the woman are the same. We should also recognize that the man is created first, and that the man is commissioned to serve *Yahweh* God as a priest in the temple of the garden of Eden in a way that the woman is not. He is given a role of leadership which we see even in the way that he names the woman (Gen. 2:23). Nevertheless, the woman is in no way inferior to the man, but the two are equal, joined together as one flesh in their marriage. As we seek to understand *Yahweh* God’s original purpose for the two sexes and for marriage, we must strike a balance between acknowledging the *difference* between the man and the woman, while also affirming their absolute *equality*.

To push this further, we should notice that it is not the *woman* who is called to leave her father and mother for marriage, but the *man*: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The word “leave” should probably be translated more strongly as “forsake,” so that a man’s primary duties, obligations, and affections must shift away from his parents and settle on his wife.³⁰ We read no similar commandment given in regard to the woman, which might perhaps seem odd when we consider the fact that this text is written into a patriarchal society.³¹ Furthermore, a man’s loyalty to his parents were his “highest human obligation next to honoring God,” even higher than his obligation to himself.³²

But in fact, this tells us something important about the nature of biblical marriage. While the

woman is indeed called alongside the man as his “fit helper,” the man is here forbidden from abusing his authority to serve his own interests. Instead, a husband is called to the task of laying his life down sacrificially for the sake of his wife, following the example of Christ, who laid down his life for his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22–33). Everywhere, the Scriptures uniformly teach that neither spouse can live for himself or herself; rather, both must wholly seek the benefit of the other, the wife through becoming her husband’s helper, and the husband through forsaking every other loyalty—even his loyalty to his own life—for the sake of his wife.

It is this perfect balance of mutual love, honor, and respect that we ought to read the final verse of this chapter: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Both seek the good of the other in their respective roles—the husband as self-sacrificing leader, and the wife as cherished helper—so that they experience no division between themselves. They are without clothes, and, moreover, they are fully exposed and vulnerable with one another. Nevertheless, they do not experience the least bit of shame.

Human Marriage

From the beginning, then, human marriage was intended for the mutual help of the man and the woman, as well as for the child-bearing through which God would populate the entire world with his image-bearing people. Although the curse of sin almost immediately shatters the perfection of the marriage of the man and the woman who were naked and unashamed, we see here a pattern that carries through to this day. In marriage, God brings together a man and a woman to display his own image in their one-flesh union. The marriage partners have different roles, but are absolute equals in their partnership.

In our day, this original plan for marriage has been challenged on every front, even to the degree of permitting no-fault divorce and legally changing the definition of marriage to allow same-sex couples to marry.³³ While Christians should oppose these corruptions of God’s original design for marriage, we should also ask the Holy Spirit to search our own hearts and lives to convict us for where *we* do not sufficiently honor God’s divine plan for marriage. If marriage ought to be a one-flesh union between a man and a woman, do we secretly indulge lust in our own hearts, or perhaps do we use pornography, or are we cultivating an improper relationship with someone who is not our spouse? If marriage is designed to bring forth God’s image-bearing offspring, do we seek to raise up our children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, praying for them and training them from the beginning to love God and to serve other people? Are husbands severing every loyalty—not only their loyalty to their parents, but even to themselves, their comforts, and their desires—in order to lay their lives down for the good of their wives? Are wives seeking to relate to their husbands after the manner in which Yahweh himself was a helper to Israel?

God designed marriage to be beautiful, but because of sin, marriage is not easy. Let us pray that God will bless the marriages in our midst to show forth the glory of God’s image and Christ’s relationship to his church before the watching world.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do we need two accounts of the creation story? Why is it so important to acknowledge the almighty power of the Creator *God* in Genesis 1:1–2:3? Why is it so important to recognize the

intimate, covenantal love of *Yahweh God* in Genesis 2:4–25? What happens if we lose either perspective of God?

2. Think about the work that God has called you to do. In what ways has he called you to further his work of *filling* through the work of *cultivating*? In what ways has he called you to preserve his work of *forming* through the work of *keeping*? How might seeing your work in light of Genesis 2 help you work unto the Lord in your vocation?

3. What does the nature of cultivating and keeping as *priestly* work tell us about our own work? How do we avoid the two extremes of either over-spiritualizing or under-spiritualizing our work? In what ways does a robust understanding of creation help us to see the connection between our work and our calling as priests of God?

4. If you are a married man, how might God be calling you to forsake previous ties in order to sacrificially lead and cling to your wife? If you are a married woman, how might God be calling you to serve as a helper to your husband? If you are unmarried, what does this passage teach you about how to think about the possibility of marriage?

Notes

1. Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 152.

2. The phrase “These are the generations of...” (אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת) also appears in Gen. 6:9, 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2; “cf. 5:1 for a variant of the formula [‘this is the book of the generations of Adam’].” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 150.)

3. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 152.

4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 154.

5. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 122.

6. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 97.

7. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 154.

8. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 158.

9. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 123.

10. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 67.

11. C. S. Lewis makes use of this prophecy in his Narnia story, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, in which Reepicheep the mouse hears a similar prophecy throughout his entire life: “Where the waves grow sweet, Doubt not, Reepicheep, There is the utter East.” The “utter East” borders on Aslan’s country, and is the first part of the saltwater that the water flowing from Aslan’s country makes “sweet”—that is, fresh. (C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 198.)

12. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 100.

13. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 124.

14. There is a significant grammatical question about the referent of “it” attached to both of these words, since “it” is a feminine pronominal suffix, but “garden” is a masculine noun, which makes it difficult to see how the “it” that Adam works and keeps could be the garden. Sailhamer argues that these are not feminine

pronominal suffixes, but rather an infinitive form of the verbs without any pronouns, so he translates these words as “to worship and to obey” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 100–01). The difference between the two forms is a matter of the presence or absence of a single dot (*mappiq*) in each word: from *לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשַׁמְרָהּ* (the text as it stands) to *לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשַׁמְרָהּ* (Sailhamer’s conjectured version), but no known manuscript omits those dots. While Sailhamer is certainly right about the priestly overtones of this phrase, Mathews seems to employ the best judgment, writing, “It is best to interpret our infinitives as referring to ‘work’ but secondarily anticipating the Mosaic context of worship and obedience” (Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 209, footnote 96). Then, Mathews cites Waltke and O’Connor, who argue that, while “garden” [גַּן] is usually masculine, the whole phrase “garden of Eden” [גַּן-עֵדֶן] must be considered feminine, based on those pronominal suffixes (Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 104). While there is no additional evidence for taking the whole phrase as feminine, that approach seems more plausible than removing the *mappiq* dots altogether as Sailhamer has suggested.

15. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, 209–10.

16. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 66–67.

17. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 66.

18. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 182.

19. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 71.

20. Walton, *Genesis*, 182.

21. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 73.

22. Walton, *Genesis*, 186–87.

23. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 81–87.

24. Tim Keller attributes this insight to the Lutheran tradition’s contribution to our Christian understanding of the integration of our faith and work. (Timothy Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2014), 4.)

25. Tim Keller attributes this insight as the main contribution of the Reformed tradition: “Work not only cares for creation, but also directs and structures it. In this Reformed view, the purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive.” (Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 4.)

26. See, for example, the works of Peter Drucker, whose business philosophies of management and leadership were rooted in the theology that human beings were created in the image of God.

27. For an extended reflection on work—its nature, the effects of the fall on our work, and the restoration of work in the gospel—see Tim Keller’s *Every Good Endeavor*, cited above.

28. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 126.

29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 176.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 70–71.

31. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 180–81.

32. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 71.

33. A thorough discussion of the subjects of divorce and same-sex marriage are beyond the scope of this book. For our purposes, it will suffice to observe that God’s original design for marriage is to include one man and one woman in a lifelong, covenantal relationship for their mutual edification and childbearing.