

The Invisible Kingdom

by Ray C. Stedman

It is interesting to observe the reactions when one mentions Genesis in a mixed company of Christians and non-Christians:

- From the Christians, a note of mild terror is evident on their faces. They appear to be troubled by this passage and grow a bit panicky. This nervous reaction develops because many Christians are embarrassed by Genesis 1 and feel that it is best to leave this skeleton rattling in the closet rather than bring it out and discuss it in the presence of those who are not Christians. This is largely because Christians, under the onslaught of pseudo-scientific approaches, have come to regard Genesis as a kind of Achilles heel of Christianity. They feel there are more positive Christian truths which we ought to be declaring, so there is a tendency to slur over Genesis 1.
- Non-Christians, on the other hand, tend to assume a rather patronizing smile when you bring up this passage. They manifest a tolerant air of patient superiority. They look at us almost as though they were saying to themselves, "You Christians can get to us when you talk about sin and forgiveness, or guilt and grace, because we feel a need along this line, but when you get on Genesis 1 we've got you cold. You are way off base in this area. Science is a much safer guide to an understanding of life, the world, and the universe around us than these ancient myths."

Both of these attitudes are profoundly wrong. Non-Christians usually assume far too much about

what science teaches about the universe and this accounts for their patronizing air in approaching Genesis 1. On the other hand, Christians assume far too little when they become nervous and apologetic over Genesis 1. For the truth is, Genesis 1 is the key to nature and to science, and science today stands in desperate need of the teaching of this passage in order to understand properly the physical universe in which we live. As I have been trying to bring out in these studies, the two revelations from God need each other to complement one another.

Those scientists who are willing to acknowledge that this passage is from God and contains accurate and authentic information about the beginnings of the universe will find that they have been provided with a wonderful framework within which the discoveries of science can provide endless confirmations of the wisdom and the power of God. I do not know anything that can add more zest, color, and excitement to the search of science than an understanding of the teachings of Genesis 1. What I am really saying is that you do not find God through nature. Anyone who attempts to find God through the study of, or exposure to, nature will never find him that way. The truth is quite the other way around: you understand nature through God. Nature begins to unfold its full meaning only if you approach it first with a knowledge and understanding of God through Jesus Christ. It then provides the devout student with a thousand and one confirmations of what the Bible reveals about the natural world around us.

We have already discovered in this passage that revelation adds an element that science can never find out, the element of purpose in the universe. Even in the second verse of Genesis 1 we were told that "The Spirit of God was moving over

the face of the waters,” {Gen 1:2b RSV}. That note on which the Bible opens its revelation of the relationship of God to his universe is characteristic of all that follows throughout the rest of Scripture, and is confirmed by the study of the universe around us. God is moving in history. God is accomplishing an end; he is moving toward a goal. There is a goal which God definitely has in mind, and toward it all the physical universe is moving.

The steps God took to accomplish this are recorded as several great creative acts occurring in certain progressive stages which logically succeed one another. It does not all happen at once. This is very clear from this first chapter of Genesis. God did not bring the world and the universe into being with a snap of his fingers or with one sentence from his lips. He could have, but he did not. He chose to do it in stages, and these stages are very clearly evident throughout this passage.

Furthermore, these stages, as we have already seen, are unrelated to any time sequence or time scale. There is nothing in this passage that tells us when God created the heavens and the earth, nor how long he took in the process of it. As we have seen, the *days* that are mentioned here seem most likely to be references to indefinite periods of time which are symbolized by our 24-hour days. Each one encompasses an evening and a morning. That is the primary truth which is declared in the Genesis passage. I will say more of this as we go along in these studies, but it is important that we hold this clearly in mind as we cover this first chapter in Genesis.

Then we also noted that the physical things which God has made are reflections of an inner and greater reality. Do not turn that around. It is not that the things that take place in the inner life are shadows or reflections of the physical universe around. It is quite the other way. The physical universe was made to correspond to the inner reality. It is the inner truth, the truths that affect the soul and spirit of man, with which God is primarily concerned. He made the physical universe in order to reflect these so that, as we look around us and observe and assimilate with our senses, we are constantly reminded of the great things that are taking place within us, and around us, in the invisible kingdom that surrounds us on all sides. It is very important that we remember that, for otherwise we turn Genesis 1 into an attempt to explain how God made the universe on the physical level

only and forget the greater thrust it is designed to teach, i.e., not how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven – and how to live on earth until we do.

As we saw, Step #1 involved the creation of the heavens and the earth, formless and empty, as the Scripture says. It was one great featureless globe covered by an ocean wrapped in darkness. That was the way it began. There was no life upon it; it was void, empty of life.

Step #2 was the creation of light and its separation from darkness. On the physical level this involved the rotation of the earth, and thus the separating of the light from the darkness. But this has implications also in the moral and spiritual realm. All this was done on day one – not necessarily in 24-hours, though it could have been – but, and this is the primary emphasis, in a period of evening followed by morning. As we have seen, this means, metaphorically, a period of ignorance out of which comes growing understanding, or, which is probably more likely because at this time there was no human life on earth to understand, it can also mean a period of incompleteness which grows at last to the full perfection and completeness of God’s idea. This is what this phrase, “evening and morning,” means in Genesis 1.

We come now to Step #3, occurring on day two, found in Verses 6 through 8:

And God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. {Gen 1:6-8 RSV}

Much ridicule has been poked at this passage. We are told that the Hebrews were a very primitive people who believed that the sky was like a great inverted bowl over the earth to which the stars were glued on the inner side, that the firmament was a solid body over the earth. Certain of the early stories of creation from Babylonian myths do reflect something of that idea. But if you carefully look at the Hebrew word which is used here for firmament, *raqia*, you will discover that it cannot be interpreted in that way. This is a word which comes from a root that means, “to pound and thereby ex-

pand,” as gold, for instance, is beaten until it expands to an almost infinite thinness. The idea of this word is “to make thin,” or “to stretch out,” so it is a beautifully descriptive word for the atmosphere. Time and time again throughout the rest of the Old Testament you find the prophets referring to this phenomenon, and they almost invariably use the term, “God stretched forth the heavens,” {cf, Isa 51:13}. Isaiah repeats that many times.

This is a beautifully accurate description of the atmosphere which indeed is stretched out over a hundred miles high, gradually thinning out until it merges with the emptiness of space, and is also stretched completely around the earth, forming a great blanket of air which serves to protect us from the lethal rays of the sun, and to provide a medium in which the birds can fly and the clouds be carried. It also preserves the warmth of the earth, thus equalizing the temperature, and in many and varied ways making possible life upon this earth. It is all accomplished by the stretching out of this amazing blanket of air called the *atmosphere*.

It has been pointed out by scientists that the atmosphere of our earth is unique in the solar system. Other planets have an atmosphere, but they do not have one like ours. No other planet has an atmosphere composed of the same gases as earth’s and able to support human life as we know it. This does not mean that the Creator could not form life that could exist in an atmosphere of methane or ammonia as some of the other planets have. But none has an atmosphere which contains immense quantities of oxygen and also great quantities of nitrogen, so necessary for the soil.

But the primary purpose of this firmament or expanse of the atmosphere, according to the Bible, is not to support life. That is what we would say was its primary function, but that is not according to the Scriptures. It is interesting here, that, in Scripture, the primary purpose is to provide a platform for suspending billions of gallons of water above the earth, “that the waters might be separated from the waters,” with waters above and waters below. As a matter of fact, the ability of the atmosphere to support animal life did not develop until later when the plants were formed and began their centuries-long process of taking carbon dioxide out of the air and replacing it with oxygen. It was this that made the support of life possible. But the atmosphere’s original function and its primary purpose, according to the book of Genesis, was to

provide certain gases that would support the cycle which suspends billions of gallons of water in the atmosphere in the form of water vapor, to condense and fall later in the familiar phenomena of rain and snow.

Again, like light, this is absolutely necessary to life. If it were not for this amazing ability of the atmosphere to sustain water above the earth in great quantities there would be no plants, there would be no animals, there would be no human beings, there would be no life on this earth. The continents would be great barren deserts, arid and utterly devoid of life of any kind. Part of this is due also to the miracle of water. Our planet is unique in that we have thousands of times more water than would be expected in comparison with our neighboring planets, and that water is distributed completely around the earth in great quantities. It is this enormous amount of water that changes the character of earth and makes it different from the other planets. Water has an amazing property. It is able to appear in all three states of matter within a very small range of temperature, as a liquid, a solid, and a gas. It is this ability to change from vapor to liquid and then to form ice which makes life possible upon this earth.

There is an interesting Biblical and scientific theory that suggests that all of this was highly intensified in the primitive earth; that perhaps, before the Flood, the earth was surrounded by a water vapor canopy which enveloped the earth in thick clouds, much as the planet Venus has today. This canopy created hot-house conditions all around the earth. Thus it was possible for tropical regions to exist at the poles, as we know actually did exist from the fossil remains that are discovered in those areas. It was, perhaps, the collapse of this great canopy of vapor (or even ice), which caused the flood and was the reason for the sudden death of thousands of mammoths, rhinoceroses and other animals which were suddenly entombed in ice in the polar regions and are today dug up from time to time, their flesh still well enough preserved for animals to eat, though they are thousands of years old. This is one of the amazing facts which science has to wrestle with and which it finds great difficulty in explaining.

Now this canopy idea is but a theory. I stress that again, because we need to be careful that, since these theories seem rather attractive to us, we do not assume they are facts. Like certain scientific

proposals, they are nothing but theories. But it has certain possibilities for explaining the conditions that prevailed on the primitive earth.

Regardless of this, it is still true that we have an atmosphere capable of suspending billions of gallons of water above the earth – the waters separated from the waters. That is the physical level. It is a wonder all in itself, but we must never read these passages in Genesis without asking ourselves, what does it intend to teach us on the moral or spiritual level? What inner reality is reflected in this ability of the atmosphere to suspend water above the earth? The key is found in what God called this firmament. God called it “Heaven.” There were heavenly waters and there were earthly waters. Water is used very frequently in the Scriptures as a symbol of life, of human life. For example, in the book of Revelation (17:15), John was told that the great harlot which he saw sitting upon the waters was a picture of the false church and that the waters were peoples and nations and multitudes gathered together. Thus the waters here in Genesis are a picture of human life.

What God is saying by this beautifully symbolic description is that there is earthly life and there is heavenly life; and, further, that we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom, just as with an invisible atmosphere. That spiritual kingdom is as real as anything we can see or taste or touch or feel. And from it, just as from the atmosphere around us, comes blessings which make human life happy and even possible: blessings such as joy and love and peace, hope and trust and power. Without that invisible spiritual kingdom human life would be mere animal life devoid of joy, blessing, peace, and power and all other qualities that make life worth living. Furthermore, as the rain falls upon the just and the unjust alike, so do these blessings come to the good and the bad equally all over the earth.

Paul speaks of that in the book of Romans. He reminds us that all these mercies come from God upon the just and the unjust alike, in order, he says, to lead men unto repentance {cf, Rom 2:4}; to make them stop and look and think, where does this come from? Why is it that we are granted the ability to love and to have our family around us and to share companionship with others? The apostle tells us that all these blessings come from the loving heart of a Father who pours them out even upon those who are resistant to his will, as well as upon

those who fall in line with his purposes. He loves mankind and he blesses mankind throughout the period of this life in order that we might come to a change of mind about ourselves and about God, that we might remember where these blessings come from, and open our hearts and lives to the influences of God’s gracious kingdom. For the unbeliever these blessings become less and less as life goes on because of his resistance to the grace of God, but for the believer they come in increasing abundance, pouring into the life that recognizes the spiritual atmosphere around us.

Also, just as the waters upon the earth are invisibly drawn up and disappear into the higher ocean above, so the human spirit, as it comes to the end of its journey on earth, quite unseen, leaves this earth to join the invisible kingdom above, whether for good or evil depending upon the attitude shown in this life toward the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. All this is beautifully symbolized in the creation of the firmament and the operation of the atmosphere in its physical manifestation. It is all designed to teach us that there is a life to come as well as a life now.

Someone tried to convey this in an epitaph written on a tombstone:

Remember, Friend, as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I.
As I am now, you too shall be,
Prepare for death, and follow me.

Some wag had written underneath,

***To follow you I 'm not content
Until I know which way you went!***

Of course, this is the whole impact of this teaching – not only that there is a life to come but that there are possibilities of good or evil in that life, depending upon the choices made now.

But there is something else interesting here. Just as the waters around us invisibly evaporate to become water vapor in the skies, with no visible demonstration or display, the Scriptures indicate that it was never God’s intention for death to be the means by which man would pass from the realm of earthly existence into that wider and greater realm of heavenly life. I say that because, as we will learn later on, death is regarded as an enemy, an alien invader, which comes in as a result of the rebellion and sin of human life. It was originally in-

tended for human beings to pass without struggle, without any sense of separation or darkness, from this life into the next. You see this exemplified in that amazing story of the Lord Jesus who took Peter, James, and John, and going up onto a high mountain was suddenly transfigured before them. His garments began to shine with light, his fleshly nature was suddenly transformed {cf, Matt 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:22-27}, and he passed easily from the conditions of earthly life into the conditions of heavenly existence, and then back again, in the very presence of the disciples. I believe that was God's intention for man, as the Scriptures make clear, but death comes in as the great enemy, linked with the sin and rebellion of the human heart.

Thus we come to the end of the second day with its period of evening and morning, i.e., a period of incompleteness, merging at last into the complete manifestation of the intention of God at this stage of earth development. There was, evidently, a period of gradual gathering of the gases of the atmosphere, and the gradual saturating of them with water, until the earth reached the phase that God desired at this stage. It was covered with a blanket of air in which water was suspended and mists covered the earth. Thus the earth was prepared for the emergence of the land, which occurs on the next day.

What have we learned thus far in this account? What are the great lessons that God has deeply etched in nature in order to remind us of the corresponding realities in our lives which the physical processes are designed to picture?

1. First, we learned that there was light and darkness, i.e., there is both good and evil. God calls the light good. There is good in the universe but there is also that which is not good, that which is the opposite of good, that which is darkness.
 - This means that throughout our life there will be a need for discernment to be exercised, the need to tell the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error.
 - And there will need to be choices made. Life will be constantly filled with demand for choices between these two opposite poles.
2. Furthermore, we have learned on day two that there is a life now and a life to come – that human existence is not completed by fulfilling this earthly process here. The two lives are tied together with invisible but very real links and one merges into the other as the atmosphere merges into the waters of the sea, and the sea into the waters of the air.

I would like to submit to you that the sickness of our day is being caused by man's forgetting of these two great facts. Isn't this what lies behind the outbreaks of violence and the moral decline which we are facing in our day? What causes these separations

 - between nations and individuals,
 - between the classes of society,
 - between husbands and wives,these divisions in all these areas?

Isn't it directly traceable to the fact that we have forgotten these two great truths? We do not want any longer to distinguish between good and evil, between light and darkness. We are being assaulted today by a tremendous barrage of propaganda that says there is no evil, that all things are good, everything is right, everything is natural and wholesome and good for us, and there is no darkness. We are told we do not need to make these distinctions. But God has implanted it within nature, emblazoned it in the universe, built it into the very structure of the world, this reminder of the fact that there is light and darkness. Every 24-hours these reminders come to us. There is good and there is evil, and distinctions must be made.

It is also very evident today that we no longer want to think about a life to come. We want everything now. Instant happiness – that is what the world is seeking. We do not want to go through times of discipline or struggle, but we demand everything now, immediately, this present moment. We do not want to anticipate a future, we do not like the idea of preparing for something to come, of finding our fulfillment at a later day instead of now. All this is indicative of the fact that we have forgotten what God has imbedded in the universe, symbolized in the firmament around us, the idea that this life is a preparatory life. We can have much now. God in his wisdom and love has provided "all things richly for us to enjoy," as Paul so beautifully expresses it to Timothy {cf, 1 Tim 6:17b KJV}. But life has its disciplines. Life has its preparatory

periods – times when we must forego something now in order that we might have it in abundance later. Life will find its culmination and its fulfillment, not now but then, when conditions will be right and all God's great provisions for man will be available to him. Then there will be

- no more sorrow,
- no more death,
- no more tears,
- no more parting.

We need to remind ourselves of the truth of Browning's great words which, perhaps, have greater meaning for us than even he intended:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life,
for which the first was made.

This is what God is teaching us in day two.

Prayer:

Grant to us, our Heavenly Father, that these lessons so vividly and so powerfully manifested in nature around about us might not be lost upon our unthinking hearts. How many days have we already lived without hearing what the whole creation is shouting to us from every side. Forgive us, our Father, and help us to remember that every common bush is aflame with God and heaven is speaking to us in everything. Give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to ponder, to meditate, and to remember that all these things are but confirmations of the great themes that run throughout the whole of the Scriptures – your redeeming love, your unchanging grace, your redemptive heart – which seek and woo man in his lostness, man in his ruined condition that he might find again that which he has lost. We ask that these things may be true to us in experience as we open our eyes by faith to receive them from your hand. In Jesus' name, Amen.