

GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD

by Steve Zeisler

A favorite experience of couples is getting the nursery ready for the first child. They put together the crib and perhaps paint or wallpaper the small room. Mom and Dad may decorate the room with artwork of gentle pastoral scenes, themes from nursery rhymes, or children's stories. They use soft fabrics and put cuddly stuffed animals in the crib or on the changing table. They do these things to welcome their beloved child, whom they eagerly anticipate and delight in. No baby's room is decorated with chunks of concrete, frayed cables, and pictures of jammed freeways or miserably cramped office cubicles. The new little one is not confronted with the hard realities of life.

Such preparations are reminiscent of what our heavenly Father did when he created the "nursery" for the children he would create in his image. The opening verses of Genesis are a description of how our Father created a home for us. The world he created was warm, beautiful, inviting, perfect. Let's read the Genesis version of getting the nursery ready for the children to inhabit (1:3-23):

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning-the first day.

And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning-the second day.

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning-the third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights-the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning-the fourth day.

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning-the fifth day.

A PLACE FOR GOD'S CHILDREN

We might restate the events of these five days this way: On the first day the impenetrable gases and dust that cover the earth, which are opaque to light, at God's word become translucent. Beautiful light reaches the surface of the planet. God's announcement here is that light should exist for an observer whose perspective is the earth.

On the second day of creation, the waters are separated. That is, now there are waters on the surface of the earth and a cloud layer above that contains water. This is the creation of a breathable atmosphere in which we can thrive. In making it so, God also makes a place for us on the surface of the earth. He puts the heavens far above us, so as we look up we can see clouds, and above them, stars and sun and moon.

Then we're told that the sea parts and land masses come into existence. The land masses rise either through volcanic eruptions or earthquakes. Once again, this anticipates our needs. Once again, we see God making the nursery more and more ready for the children to come. God wants the earth to be the best possible place for the man and woman who will inhabit it.

Plant life begins when the land is separated from the sea, and the focus even here is on trees that bear fruit that is good for people like us to eat.

On the fourth day the translucent cloud cover becomes transparent, and we can see what the clouds have hidden before, the stars and the moon and the sun. An extraordinary vision of the heavens is possible for those standing on earth. And interestingly, the text records something else that becomes possible when we see the heavens: We can observe the passage of time. We can measure seasons, years, days.

Right now we're near the beginning of the Jewish new year, Rosh Hashana. Celebrating a new year, we might look back over the past year to see where we have come from, what character God has developed in us, what lessons we have learned, what failures we need to repent of. Knowing that life has its routine allows for reflection. It allows us to be grateful for what has happened over the course of time.

On the fifth day the sea and the sky become filled with living things as the animals of the sea and of the air are called into existence. God continues to make ready the place where his children will live.

THE TESTIMONY OF CREATION

Now, we live in a broken world in which the "nursery" is more filled with wreckage and frustration than it is with ancient beauty and welcome. Deadly conditions exist because of the rebellious choices of human beings and of angels. The winds and storms that might bring needed rain can be devastating. The earth quakes and people die, volcanoes erupt and cities are buried. Some plants poison instead of nourish. Some animals are dangerous. Cancers and viruses thrive. Weeds grow as vigorously as wheat or corn. Since we live in such a world, what good does it do to read of the origin of things and the creation prior to its being damaged by the choices of moral agents?

I want to suggest a few things. First, Psalm 19 records a perspective that the Bible speaks to frequently, that the heavens are declaring the glory of God. Things are broken, but they are not destroyed. And we can still see in the creation what the Lord Creator intended when he made it. We can still see his glory and his power, we can still delight in his beauty. Creation is shouting its testimony to us, and Scripture is interpreting that message. Recall the hymn *This is My Father's World*: (1)

*"This is my Father's world,
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their Maker's praise.*

*This is my Father's world:
He shines in all that's fair;*

*In the rustling grass I hear him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere."*

The prophet Amos said (4:13),

**"He who forms the mountains,
creates the wind,
and reveals his thoughts to man,
he who turns dawn to darkness,
and treads the high places of the earth--
the LORD God Almighty is his name."**

Colossians 1:17 tells us that "he [Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Making the same point, the writer of Hebrews says the Son is "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (1:3). The triune God is still present in the creation. The cells of our body hold together and function, our heart pumps, our five senses work, and our brain records what they take in, all because Jesus is holding them together. We can learn of him in his creation. And as we have his word to interpret what we learn, we are told true things by the speech of the created world.

Now there are those who will observe the world, using their senses and the scientific instruments that extend their senses to study what exists, and draw different conclusions from the Scriptures. For instance, everyone agrees that we have characteristics in common with other mammals. We are vertebrates, we bear live young, we feed infants by lactation. And we might observe that we are most similar to the primates in terms of blood chemistry, hormone function, fetal development, and other things. Some will conclude that human beings came into existence through some impersonal process of time and chance over many millions of years, and we and all of the animals are descended from common ancestors.

But as believing people, we find ourselves in awe, thanking God that we can study animals of all kinds and learn something about ourselves. Our loving Creator has made it possible to discover aspects of human nature through observations of what we see elsewhere in the created world. All of these similarities that are built into creation don't testify to impersonal forces, they testify to the Maker.

David was a shepherd when he was a boy. He noticed the foolishness, inadequacy, and neediness of his sheep. They required the continual care of a shepherd. He eventually wrote an extraordinary prayer that began, "The LORD is my shepherd...." (Psalm 23). In it he was saying, "I'm just like the sheep. I need a shepherd, someone to care for me in my neediness and foolishness and brokenness." It was his experience of examining the world that gave him the insight of his need for God. The creation can always do that.

The apostle Paul imagined the ridiculousness of having ears and eyes and hands and feet bounding around by themselves trying to succeed at anything. He thought about what it meant for the human body to work together, each part contributing. Then he said to those whom he loved, "You're one body-function that way. We're different, but we need to be united." His reaching was based on the nature of the created world.

MAKING WRONG CHOICES ABOUT CREATED THINGS

Other teaching from these verses in Genesis remains life-giving to us. It is important to know that evil is not eternal. It didn't exist in the beginning. Rebellion, death, destruction, decay, and sin do not co-exist eternally with righteousness, godliness, and hope. Evil had its beginning and it will have an end. It is an invader; it does not belong. We can derive hope from the fact that the best things that are true of us are the eternal ones, and the worst things are only temporary, by the grace of God.

Further, as Paul says, "...we do not war according to the flesh" (NASB; 2 Corinthians 10:3). That is, our war is not with molecules. Chocolate, beer, sunlight, sex, cholesterol, atomic power, and so on are not dangerous in themselves. Things that exist physically because God created them are good. But as fallen creatures, using good things to destructive ends seems normal, and we continue to have to make the opposite choices-the choices of faith that honor God in our use of everything that exists.

Finally, I want to contrast the experience of ancient people, as they read this text, with the experience of modern people. The ancients, before much of the technology that we take for granted was invented, were generally terrified by the world they lived in. Most of their actions in regard to gods and spirituality were driven by fear: Would the rains come and water the crops, or was the drought going to go on year after year? If your son fell sick by some unknown and terrible disease, would he be made well again? If invading armies came like locusts over the hills, with what could you fight back or find security? So ancient people would worship the sun, moon, clouds, sea monsters, and so on. They built idols in their names and engaged in frightful practices to catch the attention of the gods. People would sacrifice their children, cut their bodies, and debase themselves in other ways, hoping that something would give them a bit of mastery over the unpredictable and chaotic world they lived in.

The first time the ancients heard what Genesis teaches, they must have been thrilled by it: The sun, the moon, the clouds are not God. The sea monsters are no source of hope for dealing with the difficulty you face. The sun and moon didn't even become visible until the fourth day of creation. They weren't in charge of anything. The Lord God of Israel made them all. He made the sea monsters for fun. He placed the clouds where they were for our sakes. They do what they're told. This is the story of the One who is himself over all things. This is the One to whom we must appeal for hope, for answers, for comfort when there are no answers.

We in modern times, on the other hand, tend to trust ourselves instead of invisible gods. We have made gods of human beings. We imagine ourselves being able to control the forces of nature. So if the crops aren't doing well we irrigate or fertilize. If our children fall sick, we go to the doctor. We schedule our lives without any reference to time or seasons. People work in buildings where darkness and light are completely irrelevant, and the temperature is always the same. As long as the sun is shining somewhere, in London or Tokyo or San Francisco, they are about their jobs, meeting their deadlines. They're in charge.

And life is more chaotic and worse than when humanity worshiped the idolatrous gods of old. The awful unintended consequences of what we do grow worse and worse. The toxic substances that come from what we make are deadly and indestructible.

Not only, like sorcerer's apprentices, are we unable to control the outcome of what we've set in motion, but once we refuse to humble ourselves before the living God, then the race is on to be God Number 1, isn't it? If humans are going to command everything, who gets to be the commander of the commanders? Others will inevitably follow suit. Militant Islamic societies have weapons of mass destruction. Communist nations have weapons of mass destruction. Such technology is not going to stay in the hands of people whom we like and approve of.

And there's a war over perspective. Is it those of European descent who get to write history? Ought not everyone else have a voice in deciding what is history or art or literature? Why should heterosexuals make the rules about family life and sexuality? Is it only males who get to have a voice? Is it only adults? What language wins, what culture wins, what ethnicity wins? Once we've made ourselves gods, we've inevitably joined a competition, and the world becomes more chaotic than ever. We are farther than ever from the stability and welcome of the nursery.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR GOD TO BE IN CHARGE

So what does Genesis 1 have to say in an age like ours in which humans have made themselves gods? It says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Everything is under his control. He is the One before whom all of us must bow, the only Lord God. All gender, ethnicity, language, culture, age, and other divisions that we make between ourselves become irrelevant when we humble ourselves in worship.

Remember Job's experience of trying to make sense of things when his life fell apart. He suffered terribly. The righteous were denied justice and the people who didn't deserve it had easy lives. Job questioned and wrestled with God in his suffering. At the end, God took Job on a tour of creation, and in 38:4-7 he essentially reminded Job of Genesis 1:

**"Were you there when I laid the earth's foundations?
Tell me, if you understand.**

**Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched the measuring line across it?**

**On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone-**

**while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?"**

Later in 38:12 he said,

**"Have you ever given orders to the morning,
or shown the dawn its place....?"**

And later in 38:35:

**"Do you send lightning bolts on their way?
Did they report to you, 'Here we are'?"**

It looked to Job as if injustice reigned, chaos was greater than order, darkness had extinguished the light, and there was no reason for hope. Of course it looks that way a lot of the time, but it's not true. The One who made everything as it is, as this story in Genesis will tell us later, is the redeemer of it all as well. He alone has authority over all these things. And what we know is that at the beginning, before rebellion occurred, he made it great. It couldn't have been more beautiful. No one has ever made a nursery for their child that came anywhere close to what God did when he built this world for his beloved children. That's the kind of God we serve.

Let's read a charge, a call for response to these things. The charge comes from the teaching of Jesus. He is God the Son, who spoke into being everything that exists. He spoke into being a hill in Galilee, and he stood on that hill one day and taught his followers a lesson from creation:

"...I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:25-33)

NOTES

1. Text by Maltbie D. Babcock.

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Third Message
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