

THE CROWN OF CREATION

by Steve Zeisler

We've been studying the beginnings of everything in the first chapter of Genesis. In this message we've come to the sixth and seventh days of creation. Genesis 1:24-31:

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

**So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.**

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground-everything that has the breath of life in it-I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning--the sixth day.

This is a description of the final preparation of the earth for the children whom God would bring into existence here, and their beginnings.

OUR FATHER'S HOUSE

But I want to recall a story to keep in mind while we examine what's before us in Genesis. It's the best-known and best-loved of the parables of Jesus: the story of the prodigal son who one day asked his father for the inheritance that would be his when his father died (Luke 15:11-32). In that culture this request was a clear reference to the son's desire that the father should be dead: "You've lived too long, old man. It's time for me to have what you have. I wish you were dead and that I could have my inheritance." The broken-hearted father acquiesced to the request, and he gave his son the money. The boy moved to a distant country and lived it up until the money was gone, and then everything was gone.

The son, at the end of his rope, came to his senses, Scripture says, when he was feeding pigs, longing to eat what the pigs ate. Something very significant came to mind: "I remember what it was like in my father's house. Even servants were treated much better than the life I'm living now. There was a time when I didn't eat with pigs, when I lived in a place that had everything that I'm missing in my life now. I remember there was a time, before I wished my father dead and myself lord in his place, when I lived a life that was satisfying, wholesome and honorable. And I've lost it all."

Now in the distant country where the son was living, the rule was survival of the fittest. As long as the competition favored you, as long as you were wealthy, successful, and dominant, you were a winner. But as soon as the money was gone, age set in, or any debilitating problem or weaknesses surfaced, people found out how they could take advantage of you, and they finished the job. You were left eating with the pigs.

But the son reminded himself, "I remember there was another way to live once, in my father's house." And it was that ability to recall that his life hadn't always been a ruin that turned the son around.

Similarly, it has not always been the lot of human beings to "eat with the pigs." The description of our creation in Genesis 1-3 is the memory we have as a human race of our father's house. There was a time when being human was a phenomenal thing, when nearness to God and dominion over the earth, righteousness and intimacy with each other were the common experience. And we can't forget. However you were raised, whatever your personal life story has been, there is a memory imprinted on you from the days before sin of living in your father's house.

Do you know what you were like when you started out? Can you call to mind what it was like to live in your father's house? The more you remember, the more you'll hunger for it. That's what I think this passage ought to do for us.

GOD'S PREPARATION FOR HIS GREATEST CREATION

Genesis 1:24-31 begins with God's final creative work, the making of land animals. Up to this point we have seen him perform two sets of three creative acts as he put the earth in place to make a home for Adam and Eve, the royal children. In the first set, on the first through third days, he separated light from darkness, separated the waters from the waters to create the atmosphere, and separated the land from the water. Then in the second set he went back over the same three steps again in some ways. The fourth day was like the first day: Light and darkness were created on the first day, and the light-bearing globes were created on the fourth day. The fifth day was like the second. On the second day the waters were separated from the waters so that there was cloud cover above and oceans below. On the fifth day the birds of the air and the fish of the waters were created. The sixth day was like the third. On the third day, after the land was created, vegetation was introduced. On the sixth day animal life on land was introduced.

Even this, if you look closely, is an affirmation of the human regents who will someday walk on the earth. God describes the animals in reference to human beings. There are many ways to classify animals. But here we are told that they are divided into wild and domestic animals, which of course is a human frame of reference. And when some are described as creeping creatures of the land, that assumes that the observer is standing around five or six feet tall and looking down on chipmunks and lizards and other creatures that live close to the ground.

Let's jump down now to verses 29-30. Verses 26-28 are really the heart of the passage, and we'll look at them in some detail in a moment. In verses 29-30, at the end of the sixth day, we have a description of life's cycle. God gave plants so that man and animals could derive sustenance from them. God saw that it was very good; it received all his approval. In a later message we're going to talk about the introduction of death to the earth. But some have wondered how it can make sense to have carnivorous animals before the introduction of death. There is much we don't know, but I don't think this passage assumes either that all animals were immortal before the fall or that they were all herbivorous before the fall. We can see that plant life ultimately sustained the whole food chain then as now. A tiny fish eats seaweed, a larger fish eats the tiny fish, and so on. This passage can describe a world of animals that finished their appointed life span and became nourishment for a larger carnivore. Such a natural end wouldn't be violent or fearful for anyone to observe or for any animal to experience.

But that is clearly not the major point of the sixth day. The major point of the sixth day comes in verses 26-28, and that's where we'll turn our attention now. Each phrase in these verses is worth paying attention to.

The first observation to make is something new and important that is spoken of in verse 26. It regards the counsel of the Trinity that took place before human beings were created. Verse 26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness....'" God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit considered together the thing that should take place next. At every other point God said, "Let there be (something)," and then it came into being and God pronounced it good. Without making any effort to plan or consider with himself what he should do, God determined that light and darkness should be, that land should be separated from water, that plants should grow on the land, and so on. But at this point, the apex of creation, the final and best thing he would do-and what he was aiming at all along-God said in counsel with himself, "Let us [thoughtfully, reflectively] do the great thing now. Let us make human beings." The extra care that Scripture tells us he took should say something about the great significance of the human race.

HUMAN DOMINION

A second observation in verses 26-28 is that God announces that the human race should have dominion over the living things of earth. Verse 26: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule....'" And verse 28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" The dominion God gives human beings, mentioned twice in these verses, is important. Everything else that exists should be under the care of human beings like us. We should serve what exists, be mindful of what is beautiful, give order to what is difficult, enhance what should grow. We were placed in dominion over all the created things, but not to abuse them, ruin them or indulge our short-lived pleasures. This has profound implications for the environment, for progress in technology, for government priorities.

On the other hand, we were not to worship the environment or let the creation rule over us. We don't find the earth to be a goddess or the planets gods. We don't find ourselves falling under the spell of created things and natural processes, reducing ourselves

beneath them. We neither abuse them nor worship them, but serve them and care for them, bringing order as God's regents over the creation.

GOD'S UNIQUE ABILITY TO CREATE

A third observation we can make in these verses is that the word "create," *bârâ'* in Hebrew, is used three times in verse 27. It is an unusual word that is used twice before in this chapter. God created in a way that no other being can. In this first chapter of Genesis various things happened. God said, for example, "Let the water teem with living creatures," and the water teemed with living creatures. God made the animals. God spoke new life into being.

We can do all of those things just as God can. We can make things- pile up rocks and make a house. We can bring forth things. An artist can bring forth a statue out of a block of marble by chipping away everything else that surrounds the beautiful object that she wants to display. All of us can act in ways to make, bring forth, or order what already exists.

What we cannot do is create something. In verse 27 we're told,

**"So God created man in his image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them."**

This word "create" is used three times for emphasis. It is used to say that rather than just ordering what was already here, God created something unique and remarkable when he made these beings who could love him. And all of this is part of our heritage. This was life in our father's house before we abandoned it.

MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

Perhaps the most familiar and most critical point to make here is that we are made in God's image and likeness. God made us different from everything else, to be like him in a way that nothing else is like him, to have the capacity to respond to him that nothing else has. There is a form of divinity that has been implanted in us that we cannot get rid of. We understand God, we know God, we long for him, we are receptive of him, we sense him, we need him in ways that nothing else created ever did, because he made us that way. I'd like to make three points in this regard.

First, being made in the image of God means that you're aware of yourself; you have a personality. Perhaps you have a pet that you think has a personality, a cat or a hog that seems to have a sense of humor and so on. But beyond any degree to which an animal can have a personality, we do. We know who we are. And because we're aware of ourselves, because we live in an environment we understand, because we can take or reject the opportunities we have, we are responsible agents.

Second, we are aware of each other. This too comes from being made in the image of God. The person next to you is also of the Lord, has the same hunger for God as you, and is also loved by God. From little babies to the very elderly, bright, foolish, strong, and weak, everyone we know is made in the image and likeness of God. They deserve justice and should be loved and respected. They are the fit objects of our compassion. The very reason that you deserve all those things, and you know you do, also declares that everyone else deserves them. It follows that we ought to be advocates of justice and to want the best for human beings of every nation, race, culture, etc.

Third, to be made in the image and likeness of God means that we have awareness of the living God himself, the capacity to worship God, to fall on our knees before him, to humble ourselves, to confess our sins, to receive his grace, to write words of praise, to know that he alone makes sense of things and that he will hear our prayers.

All of that we know deep down inside, no matter how long we've lived in the distant country and eaten with the pigs, no matter how much destruction has taken place in our world, no matter how familiar we are with the country where the survival of the fittest is the law of the land. Deep down we know that it used to be different, and that we are persons and that others are persons and that he is God. This indestructible awareness leads us, if we permit, to turn back, reach out, and call for help.

There are other important comments we can make about verses 26-28. We read that God made us male and female, blessed us, and called on us to be fruitful. All of those phrases are significant.

Every other distinction that exists between human beings-language, ethnicity, wealth, culture-are way down the line in terms of human experience, compared to the distinction of gender. From the beginning we were made male and female. To be expressed clearly, the image of God requires both masculine and feminine human beings. It requires men to be men and women to be women. The facts that we are equal to one another, we require one another, and God displays himself in both genders in community all go back to creation.

When it says God blessed us, it means he expected us to have a great life. And when he called us to be fruitful and multiply, it was not only in terms of having children, but of experiencing joy and adventure, investing ourselves in what is worth doing. Every generation since the first carries some memory of humanity as it ought to be before we wished our father dead and left for the distant country of sin and shame.

God's creative work ended on the sixth day: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning-the sixth day." The human pair were in dominion over all creation. They loved and listened to their Father. They were becoming everything he had hoped they would be, and the world was blessed because of it. And it was very good, and the sixth day was over.

GOD'S REST

Now let's read of the seventh day. This is a mystery. Genesis 2:1-3:

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

The seventh day doesn't have an evening and a morning. It doesn't ever end, but continues forever. The rest of God is the contentment of God with himself and all that he has done. The book of Hebrews reminds us that there is a Sabbath-rest for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9). Again, being made in the image of God, we are supposed to live the way God lives. We are supposed to emulate him and learn from him, and he is at rest.

Now, rest doesn't mean laziness, folded hands, eyelids half-closed, or inactivity. The opposite of rest is restlessness. The life that is lived in the rest that God has in himself and that is possible for us by faith says, "It's all done. I'm going to spend the rest of my life discovering what's done, but nothing is left uncertain, unmade, disordered, or confused." We are to live in gratitude and confidence, because God's work is done.

It reminds me of the difference between the way I do grocery shopping and the way my wife does it. It never fails that I forget to bring something home. Her efforts finish the job; mine do not. Or you work on some house project, and as soon as one thing gets fixed, something else gets broken. It's never done. And yet when God rested on the seventh day, everything was done. You wouldn't go to the refrigerator and find no milk. You wouldn't open a cupboard and find anything missing. Everything was exactly where it ought to be.

There was a time when it took no effort to enter God's rest (Hebrews 4:11). This is the longing of heart that makes people start calling for help, reaching out and saying, "God, I want it back. I'm sick of the pigs. I'm sick of the distant country. I'm sick of lovelessness. I need help, and I know that I was not made for this."

If you take out a coin and look at it, you see it has certain characteristics. A quarter, for example, has George Washington on the front and an eagle on the back. The hand that holds the coin also has characteristics. Think about these words from the gospel of Matthew:

"Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. 'Teacher,' they said, 'we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?'

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?'

'Caesar's,' they replied.

Then he said to them, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'" (Matthew 22:15-21)

Where do we discover that God has planted his image and has taken ownership in this world? The image of God is in his human creation. With your tarnish and stain and brokenness, you nevertheless will forever bear the image of God. You and I are his created children made especially for him, and his image in us is his claim of ownership of us. Give Caesar what is Caesar's-let governments make laws about what they can. But give God what is God's-that's your heart, your life.

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