

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)

Lesson Two

Creation by God's Word: Filling

Focal Text

Genesis 1:14-25; 2:1-3

Background

Genesis 1:14-25; 2:1-3

Main Idea

God filled the earth by his creative word and rested from his work.

Question to Explore

What does the Creation account reveal about God's purpose?

Quick Read

God is purposeful in all that he does. He intentionally created the perfect world for humanity to dwell in fellowship with him. The Lord models for us the importance of purposeful living, hard work, and restful celebration.

Introduction

Michael grew up in the suburban Baltimore area, graduating from Towson High School. He was diagnosed with ADHD when he was seven, and his mother encouraged him to take up swimming as a way to channel his energy. That was incredibly good parental advice. Michael Phelps is the most successful competitive swimmer in history. Competing in five different Olympics (2000-2016), he holds the following records in Olympic medal counts: Total Medals (28); Gold Medals (23); Total Medals in individual

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events (16); Gold Medals in individual events (13); and Gold Medals in one Olympic year (8, Beijing in 2008).

Even though Phelps has been quite successful in his swimming career, he has experienced some setbacks in his personal life. After his second arrest for driving under the influence, he agreed to go through an alcohol abuse rehabilitation program in Arizona to avoid jail time.

Part of the support group for Phelps was another successful athlete he had looked to for advice. His “counselor” was Ray Lewis, the All-Pro middle linebacker and Super Bowl Champion of his hometown Baltimore Ravens. Lewis recommended a book to him, and Phelps read a chapter every morning during his rehab stint. The book Lewis recommended was *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002) by Rick Warren.

I would guess the vast majority of you have either read that book for yourself or participated in a church-wide small group study of it. In fact, in 2005 the Barna Group surveyed American pastors and other ministers by asking them what were the most influential books on their lives and ministries. The most frequent response was *The Purpose Driven Life* followed by *The Purpose Driven Church*.

In this book, Pastor Warren urges readers to seek the answer to the question, “What on earth am I here for?” He declares the answer has five components. God placed us here for the purposes of Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Mission.

I believe the creation account in Genesis 1 is closely related to the thesis of Warren’s popular book. Warren told us “what God has placed us here for.” Genesis 1 tells us “what God placed here on earth for us.”

Commentary

The first three days of Creation were about the forming and shaping of the environment to make habitation possible, while the next three days were about filling or populating the earth. Remember that each day in this second pair corresponds to a day in the first pair (1 and 4; 2 and 5; 3 and 6). The seventh day that completes the week is a day of rest and blessing (2:1-3).

Day 4—Filling the Sky with Lights (1:14-19)

The work of this day complements the work of Day 1 when God created light. It is logical to assume the light that served as the framing context for the rest of the creative work was distinct from the light bearing (or reflecting) the heavenly bodies God placed in the sky. Having said that, it is impossible for us to comprehend fully the nature of the light of Day 1 except to say that its source was the very essence and character of the Creator God. This is the same God whose Son is “the light of the world” (John 8:12).

This day is the second longest of the six days (Day 6 is longest.). The repetition results from the description of these lights in both modes of "God said" (1:14-15) and "God made" (1:16-18).

In the myths of Israel's neighbors, these luminaries were considered to be deities or divine in nature. The Babylonians worshiped the sun as "Shamash," while Egyptians offered their devotion to the sun gods, "Re" and "Aton." Babylonians and Canaanites at Ugarit had cults of moon worship. Especially in Mesopotamia, stars were magnified in importance.

The biblical author clearly asserts that these lights in the sky were just that, lights that were created by God and purposefully placed in his world. They were not divine and therefore not worthy of worship. He does not even call them by their names. The use of "greater light" and "lesser light (1:16) was intentional. Even the names by which they were known, sun and moon, might be subject to misunderstanding.

"He [God] also made the stars" (1:16). The Mesopotamians looked to the stars for divine guidance about when to do certain things (astrology). In the mythological world, the stars were more important than the sun or the moon. To dispute that thought, here the stars are mentioned in last position and almost as an afterthought.

One grammatical observation demonstrates conclusively the major focus of these verses. That key is the fact that the Hebrew preposition of purpose (*le*) occurs eleven times. These verses are more interested in communicating the purpose or function of what was created on Day 4 rather than simply declaring the creative work. Seven statements in these verses declare the four functions that God created these luminaries to fulfill in his world (all but one function is stated twice).

First, God made them to make permanent the original separating work of light from darkness (1:14, 18). The separating of day from night and light from darkness says the same thing in different ways.

Secondly, God created them "to give light on the earth" (1:15, 17). In this description made by physical observance of these lights, no distinction is made between the producing of light (sun and stars) and the reflecting of light (moon).

The third purpose for which God created these lights was to "serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years" (1:14). God gave them the function of regulating the rhythms of the universe. They aid in determining the ordinary chronology consisting of solar days, lunar months, and years. They also assisted humankind in determining the alternating seasons of the year and the fixed times of the religious festivals (Passover occurred on the full moon).

We know that due to the rotation of the earth, the sun disappears and reappears, creating the alternation of day and night. The rotation of the moon around the earth results in the gradual disappearance and reappearance of the moon, helping to mark the various months. The varying distance of the earth from the sun in its elliptical orbit, combined with the tilting of the earth on its axis, produces certain times of the year when it is colder and warmer (seasons). Again, this account presents creation truth in a simplified way rather than a scientific way.

God's final purpose for these lights (sun and moon) was "to govern the day and the night" (1:16, 18). Mesopotamian mythology believed the stars, sun, and moon were gods who controlled or governed human affairs and destiny. Israel believed these lights, created by God, assisted God in governing the alternating time from their place in the sky; however, they had no governance over the earth or the human creation. God gave to humanity the position of governance or sovereignty over all the other creatures that he made (Gen. 1:26-28).

Day 5—Filling the Skies and Seas with Life (1:20-23)

On Day 2 God separated the waters and formed the sky. On Day 5 God created birds to fill the sky. On Day 3, God separated the waters on the surface of the earth forming dry land and seas. On Day 5 God filled the seas with "living creatures" (1:20). The central emphasis of "teem" (1:20) is movement and then, in a derived sense, the abundance of movement.

This is the first appearance of animated life or living beings in this creation account. The significance of that new reality probably explains the second appearance of the specialized verb used only for God's creative work. *Bara'* (1:21) occurs for the first time since verse 1. This general term for animated life or living beings occurs again with reference to animals (1:24) and human life (2:7).

The sea creations are described in two categories. "Great creatures of the sea" (1:21) is the word frequently used in the Old Testament to describe sea monsters. The second category would be inclusive of smaller fish and creatures that glide across the floor of the oceans (and rivers).

A second new feature for Day 5 is that God spoke to something else in direct address (1:22). Anyone who knows anything about our loving and compassionate God is not surprised that God's first word that was delivered to something else was a word of blessing. The content of that word of blessing is the capacity for sexual reproduction, a divine gift.

Remember, God gave the plants and trees the capacity to continue his creative activity through the production of seeds and fruit-bearing seeds, respectively. In that same way, God gave to the birds and fish the capacity to continue his creative activity by direct reproduction through sexual intercourse. Also, in the same way, the implication is that

God determined the boundaries for this capacity. They would procreate within their own created boundaries or “kind(s)” (1:21).

Day 6, Act 1—Filling the Dry Land with Animals (1:24-25)

This is the most important day of the six days of God's creative work. It commands the longest description in greatest detail, and it covers the crowning achievement of God's work, the creation of human life. Do you remember the phrase with which Rick Warren began his bestselling and most influential book, *The Purpose Driven Life*? It was the phrase “It's not about you.” The work of this day certainly corroborates that memorable statement. On this most important day of the presentation of God's creation, humanity does not even get a chance to have a day by himself. Humanity is resigned to share this day with the animals of the land.

Day 6 corresponds to Day 3 in this arrangement. They are the only days when two distinctive creative acts are declared and implemented. Day 3 provides the reality of habitable housing (dry land) and the food supply (vegetation) required by the animals and human life. Finally, on both days the land is the partner in cooperation with God in the creative work, seen in the phrase “let the land produce” (1:11, 24).

The animals God made to inhabit the dry land area of the earth shared two characteristics with the fish of the sea and the birds of the air. The animals were also “living creatures” (1:24) or animated life. The animals also had the God-given capacity to continue his creation through sexual reproduction within the assigned boundaries designed by God or “according to their kinds” (1:24, 25).

The animals created are described in three categories. They are listed in both verses covered by this section. Interestingly enough, the order in which they are listed in verse 24 is reversed in the order found in verse 25.

“Livestock” (1:24, 25) refers to all forms of domesticated animals who would assist the human creation in the work to be done. This statement is another indication that this creation presentation, on one level, was written for the purpose of explaining life as the ancient Israelites experienced it. The archaeological analysis of the discovered remains of ancient civilizations has helped to identify the transitions in human history from a hunter-gatherer existence to a sedentary or farming existence made possible by planting and by domesticating animals (sheep and cattle). The purpose of God's original creative distinctions was gradually worked out and deployed by human agents.

“Creatures that move along the ground” (1:24, 25) obviously refers to creatures who have no legs or reptiles who slither along on the earth's surface, insects, and other small animals. “Wild animals” (1:24, 25) are those who are created with characteristics that prevent them from being put to domesticated use by the humans.

It is puzzling that unlike the case with the fish and birds, the reader finds no word of God's blessing of the animals. What could explain this? Some interpreters argue that we should assume that God blessed them though it is unstated. Others believe God did not bless them because they were the only animated life that would share living space with the humans and could potentially have a negative impact upon them.

The second act of Day 6 was the creation of humanity (1:26-30). These verses will be discussed as a part of Lesson Four in this study.

Day 7—Filled with Rest (2:1-3)

The schematic presentation of creation in this six-day arrangement began with a praise sounding, summarizing statement (1:1). It now concludes with that same kind of bold assertion. (2:1). "In the beginning" of the work is balanced by the "were completed" declaration. The phrase "the heavens and the earth" appears for the first time since the first verse of Genesis 1.

The writer notes the comprehensive nature of God's creative work. He created the world in "all their vast array" (2:1). The noun underlying "array" is the Hebrew word *tsaba*. This word was used variously to describe an army (Gen. 21:22); the impressive stars in the sky (Deuteronomy 4:19); and angels that serve God (1 Kings 22:19). The basic connotation of this word is the organization of a group or the disciplined arrangement of individual elements into a cohesive and efficient unit. That is the feature commonly held by groups as widely disparate as a military force, heavenly bodies, and spiritual beings. This is the word that occurs in its plural form in the Old Testament phrase "the LORD of hosts" or *Yahweh tsebaoth*. The phrase refers to the armies of the Lord or the angels under his sovereign command.

The seventh day of this creation week was overwhelmingly the unique one. This is the only day that does not begin with the phrase "and God said." God did not speak on the seventh day. This is the only day that does not end with a statement that denoted time. It is the only day in which no divine work was done. Work was not necessary because the work had been completed (2:1-2).

Three parallel statements provide the content for what happened on the seventh day. The first of these emphasizes the fact that God "had finished the work" (2:2). It was good work that had been done. Of the words for labor or work, this one denotes the work of a skilled laborer or professional. The intelligent Engineer, Designer, Creator had finished his superb work.

The second statement characterizing the seventh day is God "rested from all his work" (2:2). In the several mythological accounts of creation from the ancient Near East, the gods also rested after the end of the conflict among them that produced the world; however, the explicit reason stated for why they were able to rest is because they created human beings to do their work for them. The biblical account provides a very different

reason for rest. God rested on the seventh day because he had finished the work he had purposed to do.

“Rested” (2:2, 3) is the Hebrew verb *shabbat*. The basic meaning of this verb is “to stop one’s work,” “to cease from one’s labor.” In a derived sense, then, if one stops working, he is in some sense resting or not exerting the energy required to accomplish work. This is of course the verb from which the noun “Sabbath” is constructed. Having said that, it should be noted that this passage does not call this day, the Sabbath day; rather, it calls it the seventh day (occurs three times). The act of God on this seventh day became the unspoken foundation for the legislation regarding the Sabbath day (Exodus 20:8-11), but the establishment of the institution of the Sabbath is not the focus here.

The third statement characterizing the seventh day included two verbs (like Day 3 and Day 6 with two acts of creation). On this final day “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy” (2:3). It is the only day that received the pronounced blessing of God. The quality of other days through the work done on them was good or beautiful, but none of them resulted in the positive statement of God’s blessing.

The divine act of making the seventh day holy means that it is distinct. This day is separated from all other days. The sense of separation from other things is the basic one of this root *qadosh*. The Old Testament clearly asserts that the God of Israel, the God who created the heavens and the earth, is the only one who is holy by his own character and nature. He is the Creator and thus distinct or separate from the entire creation.

Anyone else or anything else that becomes holy does so by the declaration of God or by the process by which God declares. Persons, places, and articles in the tabernacle (and temple) were set apart or became holy for the sole purpose of serving God. This seventh day shares in that purpose.

Conclusion

For several years, my sweet wife had been encouraging me “relentlessly” to lead our church in planning an interactive “Bethlehem” event that would help people experience Christmas in a meaningful way. She had visited several indoor and outdoor drive-through and walk-through kinds of events, and she was convinced of our need to do something similar.

The seed thought became reality last Christmas. More than 500 volunteers in our church worked together for more than eight months to implement “A South Main Bethlehem.” The volunteers worked tirelessly in an organized, disciplined way. Behind the scenes, we experienced some “hitches,” but the 4,300 guests we welcomed over three nights observed it and considered it to be a beautifully arranged and presented, meaningful experience. We saw that and said that it was “good.”

Describing the completed creation of God with the word *tsaba* reaffirms the universe as a place that is perfectly organized and set in place to fulfill God's perfect purpose for his world. When God completed this world, it had no "behind the scene hitches or flaws." God observed it and considered it to be a beautifully arranged and presented world that was capable of fulfilling his great purpose for it. That is why God saw it and said that it was "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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