

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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

Lesson Three

Creation as God's Handiwork

Focal Text

Genesis 2:4-17

Background

Genesis 2:4-17

Main Idea

God fashioned the Garden of Eden as the dwelling place for the crown of his creation.

Question to Explore

What is our responsibility in caring for God's handiwork and obeying his instructions?

Quick Read

God's handiwork is evident throughout this second account of the creation of the dwelling place where humanity began. The Lord established human beings as his representatives on earth to care and cultivate his presence in the world.

Introduction

Brenda and I met Mary Ruth in April of 1974 when I became the Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Rio Vista, Texas, in Johnson County. Mary Ruth and her daughter Susan were members of our congregation. During that time, I began work on a graduate degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I spent many hours in the library

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on that Fort Worth campus. Mary Ruth and Susan befriended my wife. Our oldest son Tim, a preschooler, suddenly had “three mothers.”

Mary Ruth began working with Brenda in the Special Education area of the school system. She gave my wife advice in the areas of marriage and parenting. They became best friends. That friendship did not end when we left that church in 1977. It continued for forty years. When Mary Ruth went to be with Jesus, I was honored to officiate at her memorial service. Our son Tim sang. My wife sat beside Susan as family.

Mary Ruth was the consummate “arts and crafts” person. She sewed, toll painted, crocheted, and embroidered, among other things. On one occasion she gave Brenda two blue and white afghan blankets she had made. Over the years these gifts have kept everybody in my family warm. We still have them. My wife will never part with them. She is grateful to have them as handiwork made by her best friend and given in love. I see that gratitude in the way she takes great care of them.

The world created by God was the perfect handiwork of the Master Designer. Since we believe the defining characteristic of the nature of that Master Designer is love (1 John 4:7), we can declare the created universe is the work of God given to us in love. We should be grateful for this wonderful gift. One way our gratitude should be expressed is by accepting the responsibility of taking good care of God's world. We should be partners with God in protecting and preserving his world.

Commentary

Genesis 2:4 seems to make a new beginning. The material before this verse is communicated in a poetry-like, symmetrically-arranged, and perfectly balanced structure. Its tone is the voice of praise to God the great Creator. The material after this verse flows as a narrative or story, with the development of a plot, suspense, and movement toward a resolution.

Because of this literary change of form and focus, some Old Testament interpreters concluded that Genesis offers the reader two parallel accounts of God's creation of the world (1:1—2:3 and 2:4-25). The consensus of current scholarship is that the material was not written as two parallel accounts of creation although they are quite different in a number of ways.

The differences can be explained by the fact they serve two different purposes. They were written to accomplish different objectives. Genesis 1:1—2:3 describes the work of God in its comprehensive scope. The focus is on God the Creator. Genesis 2:4-25, on the other hand, is an expansion or elaboration of the two busiest days of creation, Days 3 and 6. This account makes humanity, the “crown jewel” or climax of God's creation, its central concern. The focus is not on God the Creator but on humankind, the creature. It is

an intensive reflection on the destiny of that creature. This destiny has three dimensions as follows:

- To live in God's world
- To live in harmony with God's other creatures
- To live on God's terms

The Recipient of God's Handiwork (2:4-7)

“Account” (2:4) is a significant word in this book. The Hebrew noun is *toledoth* (a plural form), constructed from the verb *yalad* (to give birth). This word occurs eleven times in the Book of Genesis (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). It is an introductory statement connected to the material that follows it. It is usually followed by a genealogical list, but here it is followed by narrative.

“The LORD God” (2:4) combines the generic name for God (Elohim) with the personal name revealed to Moses as “Yahweh” (LORD). These two names occur together in this way twenty times in Genesis 2-3 and only once elsewhere in the Books of the Law (Exodus 9:30). The writer may have used them together to emphasize that the powerful God who created the entire universe is the same being who is the personal God who created humanity for relationship with himself.

Verses 5-6 must be related in some way to the work of Day 3 of Creation (1:9-13). The work of this day provided things necessary for the existence and survival of humankind. Humans could not live and thrive without edible plants for their nourishment.

The fact that God “had not sent rain on the earth” (2:5) clearly declares the process of providing water through rain was a gift from God rather than a phenomenon of natural events. This is the first mention of rain in the biblical text. Another source of water was “streams” (2:6). It probably denoted the water that bubbled up to the surface of the earth in what we call natural springs.

It is ironic that humans needed edible vegetation to live, but edible vegetation equally needed humans to help it live and produce. The environment God created was not a luxurious or paradise kind of place where humans were merely consumers. It was a dynamic place where productivity required work. God would create humanity “to work the ground” (2:5; amplified in 2:15). Agriculture was the world's oldest vocation as human beings partnered with God in the care and vitality of his world.

The creation of human beings will be discussed in more detail in the next study. Lesson 4 will be an examination of Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25.

Here in Genesis 2:7 we find the image of God's creative work as that of working with his “hands.” “Formed” (2:7) is a general verb used to describe any person who constructed something or made something with his hands. *Yatsar* denoted the making of wooden

images (Isaiah 44:9-10; Habakkuk 2:18) and the shaping of clay pots (Jeremiah 18:4; Isa. 29:16). The Hebrews also used it metaphorically to describe God's fashioning or bringing into formation the world itself (Psalm 95:5; Isa. 45:18); the people of Israel (Isa. 27:11); and servants for his work (Isa. 49:5; Jer. 1:5).

The picture of the potter who worked the clay to fashion a vessel is the closest parallel because God was working with the "dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7). This word could be rendered as dust, soil, or clay, a small sample size of the dirt that covered the dry land. Nowhere in this chapter is dust used to convey the idea of frailty; rather, it merely denotes the physicality of the human being. He is a creature made by God.

God "breathed into his nostrils" (2:7). The connotation of this verb is intimacy, something warmly personal, or a face-to-face up close and personal encounter. This act of God, found nowhere else in the creation account, accentuates the unique position of humankind in relationship to God.

The powerful but personal God energized dirt through his life-granting breath or Spirit to produce human life. Again, the uniqueness of this pinnacle of God's creation, humankind, is affirmed by the phrase "a living being" (2:7). The word translated "living" has already been used to describe other forms of animated life (Gen. 1:20, 24). This phrase "living being" (*nephesh chayya*) is exclusively used for humanity.

The frequently found Hebrew word *nephesh* is sometimes translated as "soul," but that rendering can be a misleading translation. It misleads us if we think we have a soul or some kind of "spiritual organ" like we have a heart or lungs or kidneys. The Israelites did not believe a soul or spirit was encased in a physical or biochemical body; rather, they believed in the singular nature of human life as one being that could not be divided into parts.

Humans related in several spheres or on different levels, but they were one in nature. The Hebrew concept was that a human being did not *have* or *possess* a soul, but that the human being *was* a soul (*nephesh*). The human creature could relate to all of the world physically, to one another psychologically or socially, and to God ultimately or spiritually.

Genesis 2:7 expresses the necessary humility and the potential glory of the human creature. "Man" (*adam*) is related to the "ground" (*adamah*). The former word occurs forty-six times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis and only once in chapters 12-50. It can be used both as a generic name for humanity or the personal name of an individual. The potential glory is that the human creature alone has the capacity to relate to God and to live on God's terms in that relationship.

The Trees in God's Handiwork (2:8-9)

For the first time we learn the plant life that God created was part of a "garden" (2:8). We have vegetable gardens and flower gardens or small plots of land in which we work. In the ancient Near East, a garden, filled with plants, flowers, and trees, was a delightful place of relaxation and leisure. It was more like the enjoyable place we call a park.

God is described as the divine Planter of a garden, in which he placed the humans he had made. The garden was named "Eden" (2:8) or "delightful place." The writer located the garden "in the east" (2:8), probably meaning it was east of Canaan where the first readers lived.

One of the aspects of the garden was trees that enhanced the beauty of the garden, undoubtedly providing shade, and serving as a source of delicious fruit. Two of the trees were located in a central, prominent place in the garden and served a specific purpose designed by God.

"The tree of life" (2:9) appears in this book only here and in the next chapter (3:22-24). It is not clear whether the first human couple was aware of its important potential. Only one other Old Testament book mentions the tree of life. The Book of Proverbs uses the phrase symbolically as a description of anything that improves, enhances, or celebrates life. A tree of life is present through the acts of the righteous person (Prov. 11:30); one's fulfilled desires (Prov. 13:12); and an encouraging or healing tongue (Prov. 15:4). This phrase is also found in the last chapter of the final book of the New Testament (Revelation 22:2, 14, 19) with reference to God's work in the future in a restoration of the delight of Eden.

The presence of the tree of life emphasizes the possibility of the human creature enjoying fellowship with the Creator God. It is a sharing of life. As long as the couple remained in the garden, they had the privilege of continuing or extending that privilege. This source of continuing life and fellowship with God was a gift from God and not something which the creature earned.

The second special tree in the garden was "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). This tree receives no Old Testament attention whatsoever outside of two chapters in this book (Gen. 2:9, 17; 3:22). It is obviously the tree that dominates the conversation between the serpent and the woman (Gen. 3:1-6). The significance of this tree will be discussed in the comments on Genesis 2:15-17.

The Rivers of God's Handiwork (2:10-14)

Water is a necessary component for the working efficiency and productivity of a park/garden. The writer has spoken about water above the expanse, water on the earth's surface as seas, and underground streams; but these verses contain the first time water is spoken of in the form of a river. Also for the first time in the creation text we are introduced to place names that are geographically identifiable.

It is impossible to know with precision what the writer is saying. Did the river originate outside of the garden or within the garden? It is clear the river flowed through the garden and then, after leaving the garden, it separated into four separate rivers. That is somewhat unusual as normally a river is formed by smaller rivers and tributaries flowing into it. It is also clear that the garden God created for his human creatures is identified as a part of the world rather than the entirety of the world.

“Pishon” (2:11) means to “bubble up” or “spring up intermittently” (used only here in the Old Testament.) “Havilah” (2:11) was both a personal name (Gen. 10:7, 29) and a place name (Gen. 25:18; 1 Samuel 15:7). It probably denotes sandy land. The products of Havilah sound like those of the Arabian Peninsula (Gen. 2:12).

The name and area associated with the second river is quite confusing. The root meaning of “Gihon” (2:13) is “the turbulent one,” denoting the bursting forth of a vibrant spring. This is the name of the famous spring outside of Jerusalem (1 Kings 1:33, 38, 45). “Cush” (Gen. 2:13) usually refers to the southern part of Egypt (modern Ethiopia).

The “Tigris” (2:14; also Daniel 10:4) flows through Mesopotamia rapidly and fairly straight, thus the meaning of its name, “an arrow.” “Asshur” (2:14) was the capital of the Assyrians before they established Nineveh. The Israelites considered the “Euphrates” (2:14) to be the perfect model of a great river. It is the other great river that flows through Mesopotamia. It is the only one of the four not associated with a land area.

We are familiar with the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, but what about the other two? Some interpreters feel they are the Blue Nile and the White Nile, the two major sources that join in Ethiopia or southern Egypt to form the Nile River that flows north into the Mediterranean Sea. Others feel the Pishon is the Ganges River (India), and the Gihon is the Nile River (Egypt). Some believe the Pishon and Gihon refer to tributaries or canals that flow into the two Mesopotamian Rivers.

God planted the garden as a gift to his human creature. The trees in the garden and the river that supplied nourishing water to the garden were also gifted by God. The pressing question, then, is what possible responsibility did the recipient of all of these gifts of God have?

The Responsibilities for God's Handiwork (2:15-17)

These three verses provide a remarkable statement on the doctrine of humanity or anthropology. These verses must remain together to give the true picture. Any two of them without the third verse gives a distorted perspective.

Two words define the assignment God gave to humanity. “Work” (2:15) is a Hebrew word that has a wide field of meaning. It was used to describe manual labor or work, service to God, or worship of God. Physical work was not a negative consequence of sin.

The garden was not a magical, self-perpetuating place; rather, the human creature was a partner with God in working toward the productivity of the garden.

“Take care” (2:15) from its core meaning “to keep” expanded to describe the work of protecting someone or preserving something (see Gen. 3:24). The garden was not something to be possessed by the humans; rather, it was something to be preserved.

As a part of this twofold responsibility, God gave a twofold command. The first element was a declaration of privilege or freedom given to his human creation. He gave the man permission to eat from every tree of the garden with one exception. (One can speculate that the permission included eating from the tree of life.) This was a divine gift. God permitted the man great freedom, but no human freedom is absolute or without limitations.

Sometimes it is fashionable to accuse God of harshness with regard to the one prohibition, but we must place the prohibition within the wide ranging, God-granted freedom or permission. The Creator God has the sovereign right to determine boundaries, and humankind has the responsibility to live life on God's terms. The prohibition is expressed grammatically in strong language.

The meaning of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:17) is understood in a variety of ways. I believe the phrase “knowledge of good and evil” refers to an ability to make a decision based upon what you believe is in your best interest. In other contexts it describes the knowledge sufficient to formulate and then articulate a correct decision or judgment (1 Kings 3:9; 22:18). In this prohibition God reserves the right to know fully and perfectly what is in the best interest of his human creature. The creature has the responsibility to entrust to God this complete knowledge.

The expression “you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17) always carries the sense of death as a result of punishment for actual wrongdoing or the accusation of wrong (Jeremiah. 26:8). Death is inevitable for the creature, for he is physical and mortal, but this phrase means that death will be caused by God as judgment for disobedience.

Conclusion

The world in which we live is still the remarkable handiwork of God's creative power and purpose, but it is different in character from the perfectly planted garden in which God placed his human creation. It may be true that all of us are concerned for the well-being of the planet, but it is very sad that how we act on that concern is such a divisive political issue. The Environmental Protection Agency is only forty-six years old. It was established by an executive order signed by President Nixon in December of 1970 and ratified by Congress. It was created for the purpose of determining what needed to be done to insure that we would have clean air and clean water.

Before environmental concerns became a political issue, they were a spiritual issue. God created a perfect world. God gave us the privilege of enjoying beautiful resources. God also gave us the responsibility of taking care of, protecting, and preserving the world he made. Small acts of conserving water, recycling paper, glass, and plastic, and advocacy for wise public policy in this area is part of our obligation to our Creator God.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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