

Creation and Early Pains

COMMUNION

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Genesis 1:26-28

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and all the crawling things on earth.” ²⁷ God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them. ²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and master it. Take charge of the fish of the sea, the birds in the sky, and everything crawling on the ground.” ²⁹ Then God said, “I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food.

Genesis 2:20-23

²⁰ The human named all the livestock, all the birds in the sky, and all the wild animals. But a helper perfect for him was nowhere to be found. ²¹ So the LORD God put the human into a deep and heavy sleep and took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh over it. ²² With the rib taken from the human, the LORD God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being. ²³ The human said, “This one finally is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She will be called a woman because from a man she was taken.”

Genesis 4:1-7

¹ The man Adam knew his wife Eve intimately. She became pregnant and gave birth to Cain, and said, “I have given life to a man with the LORD’s help.” ² She gave birth a second time to Cain’s brother Abel. Abel cared for the flocks, and Cain farmed the fertile land. ³ Some time later, Cain presented an offering to the LORD from the land’s crops ⁴ while Abel presented his flock’s oldest offspring with their fat.

The LORD looked favorably on Abel and his sacrifice ⁵ but didn't look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain became very angry and looked resentful. ⁶ The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why do you look so resentful? ⁷ If you do the right thing, won't you be accepted? But if you don't do the right thing, sin will be waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you, but you must rule over it."

Genesis 7:1-5

¹ The LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark with your whole household, because among this generation I've seen that you are a moral man. ² From every clean animal, take seven pairs, a male and his mate; and from every unclean animal, take one pair, a male and his mate; ³ and from the birds in the sky as well, take seven pairs, male and female, so that their offspring will survive throughout the earth. ⁴ In seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights. I will wipe off from the fertile land every living thing that I have made." ⁵ Noah did everything the LORD commanded him.



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Welcome to week 1 of the Bible Year project and to our first worship series, "The Story Begins." This week's learning covers the first 11 chapters of Genesis. Our readings this

week, as they will do each week, encompasses many stories. As we delve into the beginning of the story of God, we will develop a few key understandings and themes that run throughout the entire Bible. Each Sunday we will work through a selection of the week's passages that come together around a common idea, concept, or theme. Today we focus on the creation stories and some of the early growing pains in humankind's evolving relationship with God. We begin with the two creation stories, delving into the complexity and nuance of the biblical narrative.


Moving on, we walk a bit with Cain and Abel, reflecting on our own challenges with sin. We close with Noah and the flood, where God resets the story line once more. As we prepare to do so, let us pray...

Please turn with me to Genesis 1 as we quickly recap the creation story. On day 1 God looks over the “*formless void and darkness*” and creates light, establishing day and night.

Creation 1	
	Day 1 – light
	Day 2 – sky
	Day 3 – land/seas/plants
	Day 4 – sun/moon/stars
	Day 5 – water creatures/birds
	Day 6 – land creatures/humans
	Day 7 – sabbath/rest

On day 2 God separates the waters, creating the sky above. On day 3 God creates the land and seas, then brings forth plants. On day 4 God creates the sun, moon, and stars. On day 5 God creates the water creatures and the birds of the air. On four occasions during these first days, God looks down on creation and God “*saw how good it was.*” On day 6 God first creates the land creatures and then creates humans “*in our image.*” Looking down on creation this day, we read that as God looks down, “*it was supremely good.*” Lastly, on day 7, God rests, creating the sabbath, a day of holy rest.

Now, let’s turn to Genesis 2. In verse 4 we read, “*On the day the Lord God made earth and sky*” – that would be day 3. On this day, in verse 7, we read, “*the Lord formed the human from the topsoil...and blew life into his nostrils.*” Turning to verse 18 we see that God recognizes that it is not good for the human to be alone.

Creation 1	Creation 2
	Day 1 – light
	Day 2 – sky
	Day 3 – land/seas/plants ← Adam
	Day 4 – sun/moon/stars
	Day 5 – water creatures/birds
	Day 6 – land creatures/humans ← Eve
	Day 7 – sabbath/rest

Accordingly, God creates the animals – day 6. Then in verse 20, we read that Adam named all the animals. However, in this same verse we learn, “*But a helper perfect for him was nowhere to be found.*” So to remedy this, on day 6, God causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep, taking a rib to fashion a woman, creating a “perfect helper.”



Now, how do we make “sense” of these two contradictory stories? It is important for us to reconcile or to come to an understanding of this because as we begin this yearlong journey through the Bible this a fundamental question for

much of the Bible, not just for Genesis 1 and 2. In this week’s Bible Year podcast, Pastor John Harnish sheds some meaningful light on this fundamental question. First, he shared that the Bible is not a book of science. It is not a book of history either. Yes, the Bible does deal with science and with history. He went on to explain that the Bible is not a book of “how” but is a book of “who” and “what.” Taken as a whole, this book details God’s unfolding love story with all of creation, defining who and what God is and who and what we are intended to be within God’s story.

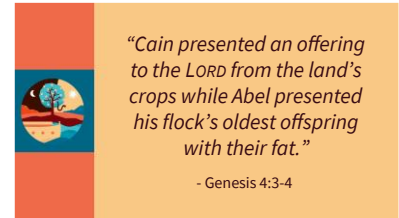
Before moving on into the story of Cain and Abel, I want to share some context from this week’s podcast that helps us to better understand the narratives that unfold in Genesis and throughout much of the Old Testament. As many of you may know, Genesis was not written by Moses. What has come to be known as the Pentateuch, or first five books of the Bible, were largely written during the time of exile in Babylon. For the Jews, this time in a foreign land was a time of chaos and darkness and isolation. It felt as if their whole world had fallen apart. As the exile wore on, they were starting to lose their identity. It was during this time that these oral stories were first written down. These were their core stories that told who and what God was, that told who and what the Jews were. These core stories reminded the Jews of God’s creative goodness and of God’s love for them. These stories reminded the Jews that they were God’s beloved and these stories reminded them that they were not like the people of Babylon. Taken as a whole, this is what our core stories of faith do for us: they remind us of who and what God is, and they remind us of who and what we are as the beloved children of God.

In the creation narrative we first learn who and what God is. We learn that God creates with a purpose, that God speaks life into creation, that God holds together the order of creation, and that God desires to be in relationship with humanity. We learn about God's investment in humanity. When God asks Adam and Eve, "*Where are you?*" we can feel God's feelings. God is heartbroken. And we learn about our humanity, about our weakness, about our inability to be fully obedient to God. We learn about who and what we are. We who succumb to the half-truths of Satan and the world, we who rationalize away decisions that we know are wrong, we can see ourselves in Adam and Eve.

One last thought on understanding the Bible as a whole and on making sense out of these two conflicting creation stories. Reverend Harnish points out that one of the lessons from when and where the Bible was written is this: we need to always take the Bible seriously but not always literally. For an illustration, he uses Shakespeare's King Lear. It too is a real book. Now, we do not know if Lear was a real person or is just a fictional character. Harnish points out that it does not matter if Lear was real or fictional. What matters is the fact that Lear's character speaks to deep truths about our human condition and provides meaningful and serious insights into our relationships with one another. All of today's stories from Genesis do the same things for us. Both creation stories, the story of Cain and Abel, and the story of the flood all teach us about God's relationship with us and about our relationships with one another.

With this framework in mind, please turn with me to Genesis 4. In our Genesis 3 reading, we were reminded that original sin entered the world and, as a consequence, Adam and Eve were sent out from the garden of Eden. Their desire to be like God led them to sin. This is a recurring theme in the Bible – humanity's desire to be like God.

As we continue with Adam and Eve's story in chapter 4, we see that they work the land and begin to have children. In Genesis 4 we learn that Cain is born and soon thereafter Abel joins his brother. Abel cares for the flocks and Cain farms the fertile land. In verses 3 and 4 we read, *"Cain presented an offering to the LORD from the land's crops while Abel presented his flock's oldest offspring with their fat."* While on the surface level we might find little difference between these two offerings to the Lord, in fact, there is a significant difference. Cain brought what we might call a "token" gift – some of the crop that the land had produced. Abel, on the other hand, brought the best that he had to offer – the firstborn of his flock and the fat portions, the richest parts of the animals. This is why God looks favorably on Abel's offering. Abel gave his best, not just some.

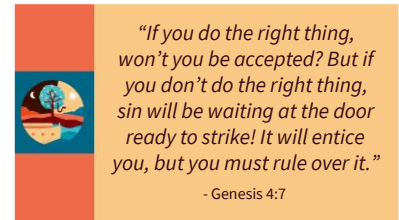


This is something that we too can wrestle with or struggle with. In what we give to God, we can sometimes give with less than a loving or generous heart or we can give from what we have left over after taking care of all of our wants. In terms of time, our most precious commodity, we can, for example, tell God that we'll read our Bibles at the end of the day – if we have time and energy left for the task. Or, in terms of our money, often our next most precious commodity, we wait to the end of the month to see what we have left and then decide that we can spare that amount for God. With both our time and our money, we can act more like Cain than Abel.

Continuing in chapter 4, God asks Cain why he is angry and resentful. Well, God had looked unfavorably on his offering. But it goes beyond that; it's deeper than that. God's question is aimed at the condition of Cain's heart. This is where we too see what defines how we give of our time and money.

God warns Cain about the condition of his heart, saying, *“If you do the right thing, won’t you be accepted? But if you don’t do the right thing, sin will be waiting at the door ready to strike! It will entice you, but you must rule over it.”* God is

warning Cain about where sin will lead. God is warning Cain and us that if we allow our heart to be greedy and to be jealous of others, then we will be led to sin. As was the serpent with Adam and Eve, Satan is ever at the door of our heart, waiting for that opportunity to deceive us, to lead us to actions that are contrary to God’s heart and to God’s will and ways. We must learn to control the desires of the flesh and of this world, lest we fall to temptation and into sin.



As we prepare to turn to our last passage for today, to Genesis 7, we see the outcome of a world lost to sin. Creation

has become corrupt, and this pains God. In chapter 6 we learn that once again God’s heart has been broken. In verses 5 and 6 we see that humanity has *“become thoroughly evil.”* Sin has come to rule over the hearts of humankind. This corporate condition of the heart leads God to regret making human beings. This regret, in turn, leads God to this decision: *“I will wipe off the land the human race.”* Yet, in Noah and his family, God finds something worth saving.

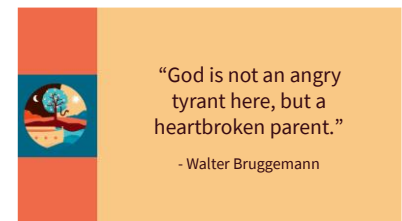


Still in chapter 6, God instructs Noah to build an ark and to gather his immediate family and *“from all living things... you are to bring a pair, male and female... into the ark to keep them alive.”* This is the two-by-two image we have of animals streaming into the ark. As we turn to Genesis 7, though, we again find a contradiction.



In verse 2 we read, *“From every clean animal, take seven pairs, a male and his mate; and from every unclean animal, take one pair, a male and his mate.”* Ok, God, was it two or was it seven? That is commonly our initial reaction, right? Before we go down that rabbit hole, again, this is not about the “how” but is about the “who” and “what.”

Once Noah and his family and the animals are in the ark, the rains come, and the earth is flooded. All living creatures – human and otherwise – perish in the flood. God does *“wipe off the land the human race.”* Now, almost all Middle Eastern cultures have a flood narrative, as well as a creation narrative. Genesis 6 and 7 are not unique in this sense. But this flood story is different than all other flood stories. That is because of the “who” and “what.” Unlike the gods in those other stories, our God is not angry with humanity. No, God is grieved by humanity. Theologian Walter Bruggemann describes the God of the flood this way: “God is not an angry tyrant here, but a heartbroken parent.” The deep truth of this is revealed in what happens after the flood.



After the rain stops and the waters recede, Noah and his family and the animals leave the ark. In chapter 9, verse 11, God says, *“I will set up my covenant with you so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.”* In the end, God decides once and for all that God will never, ever again give up on humanity. As a reminder, God connects his *“bow in the sky”* to the covenant so that each time that God sees the rainbow after the rain, God will be reminded of the covenant. This and all other covenants are central to who and what God is – loving, faithful, steadfast, true, righteous, forgiving. Throughout the Bible, this remains who and what God is – for Israel, for the early Christians, for you and for me.

Thanks be to God who loves us and desires, above all else, to be in a relationship with each of us. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How have you recently struggled to “be like God?” How can subverting your will to God’s will better align your heart with God’s heart?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you “give” to God more like how Abel to God or how Cain gave to God? Spend time in reverent prayer seeking to have a heart more like Abel’s heart.
- 3) *Study*. As you read this week’s Genesis passages, look for the recurring themes of humanity’s desire to be like God and of God’s role as heartbroken parent.