52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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2. Creation and Us

Let’s pray: Father, the world is a lie. Sin corrupted what you created to be good and we confess that. The world tells us so many things and it tells us that every single second of every single day, and it beats on us and it drives things into our deep psyche, things like our dignity and our worth come because of our performance. Oh, Father, these are lies. But we need to understand them and we need to know how to combat them. Father, we pray that as we look at Genesis 1 again this morning that you will open our eyes and that through the power of your Spirit you will help us understand what your servant Moses wrote to us so many years ago. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

I. Introduction

Last time we looked at the first five days of creation in Genesis 1 and we asked the question, “What do those first five days teach us about God?” We saw in the first three days that God is taking something that is formless and void and making it inhabitable. Then in the right hand column, days four, five, and six, God was making the land and the sky and the sea inhabited and he’s putting animals and birds and fish into His creation. What we learned were two basic things and they’re related. One is the doctrine of monotheism. Genesis 1 is all about one God and that God creates without counsel, without help, and therefore, He will not share His glory with anything else in creation. And we also learned that this one God is huge and the word for the morning was the immensity of God. And how the God who creates nebulae, who creates galaxies so numerous that we can’t name them, is the same God who comes to us, who loves us and meets us in our trials and afflictions, who encourages us when life gets difficult. When watching the video of the Sudanese Christians, you want to ask them, “How big is your God?” My guess is their God is absolutely immense. That’s what we looked at last week.

II. Day Six

Today what I want to do is look at days six and seven and ask a slightly different question. Today I want to ask, “What does creation teach us about ourselves, not the Creator, but ourselves, as part of creation?” That’s the question I want to look at this morning.

A. Animals

In day six of creation we have two major creative acts corresponding to day three. The first of those is in Genesis 1 starting at verse 24. As God creates animals, Moses writes, “And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds, livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds’, and it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds, and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.” In day six God begins by creating animals that will inhabit the now dry land.
B. Human Beings
But then He continues with the second great creative act of day six and it is the creation of human beings. Before I read it, I just need to mention one thing. The word translated “man” here is reflecting the Hebrew word “adam”; it’s a generic word that can mean lots of different things. It can refer to humanity, the human race. It can also refer to males as opposed to females, and “Adam” in Hebrew can also become a personal name as it does in Genesis 2. So as we go through this next section, notice that because of the meaning of the word man, because of “adam”, that you can refer to it in the singular and in the plural and it’s the same word. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’” That’s the summary of the creation of mankind. Genesis 2 is going to retell the story of the creation of Adam and Eve in a little more detail, but that’s it for Genesis 1.

Then Moses goes on and makes two final statements. The first has to do with God’s provision for food and he writes, starting in verse 29, “And God said, ‘Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit, you shall have them for food.’” In other words, Adam and Eve were vegetarians. Meat wasn’t given to us to eat until after Noah. “And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” In other words, the animals also were all vegetarian. I wonder where the dinosaurs fit in? “And it was so.” I always wondered about that. But then you get to verse 31 which is a great conclusion, “And God saw all that he had made and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

What is Moses trying to teach us about ourselves, what is God trying to teach us? Well, there are a lot of things. Someone said to me after the first service, “You look really frustrated up there. It was like you had so much to say and so little time to say it.” And I said, “You’re right. These are going to be hard 52 sermons for me because by picking the primary stories, I am picking the ones with the deepest and fullest theology.” So it’s going to be kind of a challenge to focus in on one thing.

III. People Are the Apex of Creation
But here is the one thing that is going on in Genesis 1 as it relates to you and to me: people are the apex of creation. People. Adam and Eve, you and me are the climax of God’s creative efforts. If you read through Genesis 1 even from a literary standpoint, you can see a crescendo building as you go through all of Genesis 1. The length of the description of every day is getting a little longer with each day. And Moses is establishing a literary pattern, a rhythm to the creation story. And so he says, “Let there be...and it was so.” God tells them to reproduce according to their kinds. There’s the repeated statement, “And it was good.” There’s this rhythm and there’s this pattern being built all the way through the first part of six days. But now we are at the climax of
creation and the patterns have all changed. And the familiar, “Let there be” becomes “Let us make” and instead of creation reproducing according to its kinds, people are created, “in our image”, in the image of God, specifically male and female. And instead of just filling the earth and inhabiting it, we are told to rule the earth, to have dominion over all the inhabitants of the earth, to rule over the inhabitants of the land and the sea and the sky and in fact, to have dominion over the earth itself. And then this crescendo comes to its fulfillment in the statement that God looks at everything he has made, and it’s not just good, it’s very good.

A. What Does Creation Teach Us about Ourselves?
What does creation teach us about ourselves? It teaches us that we are not some Darwinian mistake. Please hear that. You and I are not some mistake of creation, we are not some primordial scum that washed up on the beach and somehow had just the right influences to generate life. That is not who we are. We did not make it to the top of the evolutionary ladder because we have opposing thumbs and the ability to think abstractly. That’s not why we are what we are. I am the crowning point of God’s creation. You are the crowning point of God’s deliberate, ordered act of creation. And all of this was created so that he could create something that resembled himself and would have a place to put us. The omniscient, all-powerful God having brought form from formlessness, having inhabited all the spheres, said, “Let us make man in our image.” God wanted something that resembled himself more than the birds, more than the fish, more than the animals, more than the trees. He wanted something that resembled himself and so he made Adam and Eve, and he made you and he made me. I exist because God made me, and if that weren’t enough, he made me to resemble himself. And if that weren’t enough, He made me to accomplish His purposes while I am here and you are here. We are to subdue to earth, we are to rule it, we are to have dominion over it, and we are to care for it. And you all, if that doesn’t melt your butter, I don’t know what will. Again, the challenge of preaching and the challenge of reading a passage like Genesis 1 that is so well known is that we say, “Yeah, yeah, God created me in his image....” And it’s so easy just to let that be water off a duck’s back. But God wanted something that resembled himself and he made you. And that is who you are. That’s the message of Genesis 1 as it relates to us.

B. Who Is the Plural “Us”
Now, there are a couple of specifics that I want to look at in this passage, and the first is: who is this “Us”? “Let us make man in our image.” Who’s the plural? You notice that in verse 27, He goes to the singular, that we are created in “His image”. Well, there are several options. The commentaries and the theologies like to argue about these things. But the position that I have finally come to, and you need to know that it’s the conservative side. That doesn’t make it right, but it’s the conservative side of the theological spectrum, but hey, I’m a conservative kind of guy, what can I say? I believe that what we have here is a hint of the trinity. Creation shows God to be intensely monotheistic, doesn’t it? I mean, that’s what’s been going on all through Genesis 1. He asks no counsel, he asks for no help. There is only one God who creates absolutely everything. And yet even here there is a hint that there is more to God than meets the eye, that he is different from us. That in his singularity there is some kind of plurality. We’ve already seen that a bit in the first two verses, haven’t we? In the beginning God created, and yet it’s his Spirit that is hovering over the face of this formless creation. It’s
interesting as you take this question and you watch it weave its way through Scripture, you get to the New Testament and you find out something that is not clear up to that point. That’s simply, who created everything? Who is the God of Genesis 1? It’s Jesus, did you know that? It appears that God the Father plans and initiates, but in a general sense, it appears that it’s God the Son who actually does the work, who accomplishes his Father’s plan. Colossians 1, starting at verse 16, and talking about Jesus, “For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through him and for him.” Jesus, the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, God the Son is the agent of all creation that was created by him and through him and for him. Back in the first chapter of the gospel of John in verse 3, again, talking about Jesus, “All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made.” This is the “Us”, I believe, in Genesis 1. As God is talking to himself, God the Father, to God the Son and saying, “Let us make people, but let’s make people resemble us more than anything else in creation.” This is not an academic point on this plural. We’re going to see that it becomes incredibly relevant in just a little bit.

IV. What Is This “Image” of God

The other thing I wanted to point out is to simply ask this question: what does it mean to be created in the image of God? What does it mean to be created after his likeness? What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Again, if you read the commentaries or the theologies, there are lots of opinions. The history of church has shown people trying to find just one part of what it is to be a person and that one part is to be in the image of God and that is how the debate has normally gone. But I think the debate aside, there are a couple things that I can know for sure about what it means when it says that you and I were created in the image of God.

A. Image: We Reflect God

It first of all means that you and I were created in His likeness which means that we are like him, but we are not him. That’s a critical point we talked about last week, that I was created in the image of God, that I resemble God, but I am not God. I am distinct from God, all of creation is distinct from God, and all forms of animism and pantheism, whether it is New Age, or whether it is Mormonism, or whatever, if it asserts that we have a “spark of the divine”, then it is wrong. We are only in the likeness of God. But on the other side of the coin, I think what it means, and if you step back and look at the context and the flow, it’s pretty clear what it means to be in the image of God. It means that you and I resemble God more than any other part of creation. And there are a lot of things that go into making that, but the main point is this: God wanted, for whatever reason, part of creation to resemble him more than the birds, more than the fish, more than the animals, more than Yosemite in all of its beauty, more than the redwood trees in all of their beauty, He wanted something in creation to resemble him and so he made you, he made me, he made Adam and Eve. And you know, heavens have a marvelous function, don’t they? The heavens get to declare the glory of God. But you and I get to look like him and that is something that no mountain, no sunset, no starry sky can ever do. They can’t look like God. They can’t resemble him. They can decree his glory, but they can’t look like him. You and I were created for that purpose, to resemble him and to do his bidding.
What does that mean? Well, I think there are two sides to that coin that I wanted to spend some time on this morning. You and I were created in the image of God and on one hand that means that we reflect him. That in our face and in our eyes, we reflect, we look like, we resemble the God of the universe. And as I said, there is a lot in what it takes to do that. There are spiritual components, for example, in being created in the image of God. That you and I are more than flesh and bones, that you and I have a spirit like God is spirit and we have an awareness of the spiritual, we have an awareness of God. That is part of what it means to be born, to be created in the image of God. We have mental abilities, the ability to think abstractly. We have relational abilities, where we have the ability to relate to God, to have a need of fellowship, to share with him. That’s what Genesis 2 is all about. But, being created in the image of God has to do with our moral makeup as well. That we have a conscience, that we understand that there is a right and wrong, that there is a difference between the two. That we have choices and that we will be held accountable for the choices we make. That’s what Genesis 3 is all about. So all of these things together and probably many more are what God put into me and into you so that as we stand as God’s vice regents on this earth to do his bidding, that we resemble him more than anything else in all of creation.

We’ve got a great dog and two cats in our home. As far as dogs and cats are concerned, they are pretty good, even P.J. There’s a long history of dead cat jokes in my family and I have to keep apologizing for them. We have three great animals, they love us, even the cats. They care about us. There is something that is going on there, but Foster and P.J. and Juan will never, these three animals, as good as they are, will never resemble their creator. They cannot bring the same kind of glory to him that you and I can bring because we were created, not the animals, in the image of God.

B. What Does Creation Teach Us About Ourselves?
Now there are many, many different directions that I can go with this and one of the challenges of this week was to narrow it down to one application and here it is. What is to me the primary significance of the fact that I, Bill Mounce, am created in the image of God is simply this: it is the image of God that is the source of all human dignity. Now that’s a mouthful, but please think about it. It is the fact that you and I are created in the image of God, that is the source of all human dignity. Dignity is a great word. It’s that sense of worth that we crave, the sense of meaning, of knowing that I’m somebody, that there is dignity in who I am, there is importance, there is significance. And all of those things are things that the world is frantically searching for, aren’t they? Just frantically looking for meaning and worth, looking for dignity. Genesis 1 is here to tell us that the sole source of dignity is the fact that you and I were created in the image of God. As I thought about this, I’ve just been impressed over and over again with how totally messed up the world is. The world is so messed up on this issue. The latest word for it is “self-esteem”, right? You can see the world frantically doing anything it can to seek for dignity and meaning. And as you look at all the crazy things it does to find meaning, it contradicts itself, it goes in opposite directions, it’s just frantic because it’s looking everywhere except the source which is God’s creative act, creating us in the image of God.
I want to explore this for a while because I want you to really understand it because it’s one of those things that we hear every day. Every time you turn on the television, you are going to hear this being preached, the world’s definition of dignity. And I want to give the Holy Spirit time, he doesn’t need it I guess, but I want there to be time for this stuff to sink in and maybe in your life realize, “You know what? I have fallen prey to the world’s thinking on dignity in this area.” So let me just handle several different things. The world claims dignity but it claims it apart from God, that’s the central problem. The world claims dignity, is looking for it, is claiming that it has found it, but it is looking in all the wrong places. What was the message of the tower of Babel in Genesis? God says, “Be fruitful and fill the earth.” And sinful creation says, “No way, I don’t want to spread, I want to stay in one place. I want to build a tower because we can reach to the heavens.” And the tower of Babel was in straight defiance of the command of God and just so you don’t think the tower of Babel is ancient history, I heard it on television last night. Have you ever listened to the theme song of the Enterprise, the latest Star Trek spinoff? There, I mentioned Star Trek two Sundays in a row, I won’t mention it again for a while. I enjoy watching this show. “I have faith in the heart” (wrong object of faith), “I can reach out and touch any star.” See, that’s Genesis, that’s Babel. That’s saying, “I can achieve significance and meaning, I can reach out and touch any star, even those that are six hundred million light years away.” And that is the meaning of life, that is the significance.

What creation is doing is that it is asserting, for itself, all honor and all glory that only belong to God and His creative acts. How does the world assert dignity? Think about it. Well, one of the ways that it asserts dignity is that it measures our performance. The world puts us all on a performance track, doesn’t it? And it says, “You are worth something if you perform.” And it’s not just any kind of performance. “You have to perform our way, you have to accept our goals, our values, and then if you go that direction then you will be one of the beautiful people and we will let you put awards shows on television to give us mere saps another opportunity to pat you on the backs, oh, thou beautiful people, and tell you how great, how wonderful you are. Yes, you have meaning!” Guess what I’m talking about? And it’s just the world saying, “These are the beautiful people. They have striven after the things that we see as important and because they have succeeded, because they can run faster than you, the can jump higher than you, they can tackle harder than you, they can make more money than you, they can sing better than you, then that is the dignity, that is the honor, that is the glory, that is the meaning in life. Those are the people that are important.” We even have a television show, Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. Would any of you watch Lifestyles of the Meek and Humble? And yet those are the really important lifestyles, aren’t they? This world wants to give dignity to people based on performance, and you all, it starts really young, doesn’t it? Were you ever the last kid chosen for dodgeball? Were you or were you not the starter on your high school basketball team? Girls and boys, do you check out everyone or do you check out the beautiful people? See, this is insidious and it starts at the very, very beginning of our lives where we are told that our worth, our value, our dignity is based on what we can do.

Do you know that at last count there are 127 forms of intelligence? 127 verifiable, measurable forms of intelligence. This world values about three. It doesn’t value the person to whom God has given this amazing ability to walk into a room and to feel the pain of someone in the room. That’s not important to this world. This world wants to
remove pain. But that kind of ability, I would say, is a whole lot more important than singing like a bird. But the world is matching up dignity based on performance. That means if you and I don’t perform to their liking, to their standards, then we are worthless, we have no dignity, we have no meaning. And all that we are good for is to turn on the television and applaud the beautiful people. That’s disgusting. That is disgusting.

This whole thing of abuse is a concept that I am struggling to understand, that some of you are trying to help me understand what happens when a child is abused. There’s a sense of shame that comes over the child, some of you know what I’m talking about. A sense of shame that somehow I must be worthless or my dad would not have done this to me, or my uncle would not have done this to me, or the neighbor would not have done this to me. And there’s an incredible sense as I’m understanding it as, “I am worthless because someone told me that I am worthless by their action.” The world measures dignity-based on performance. But just to show you how messed up the world is, it does just the exact opposite, too. There is a movement today to see self-esteem as something totally separate from performance, too. “Well, we just want kids to feel good about themselves.” But what if they’re not good? “It doesn’t matter, I just want them to feel good about themselves”. But what if they’re not good, can’t we deal with reality? I had the most amazing experience when I was teaching in seminary. It wasn’t even Greek, it was an easy class, New Testament survey. And it was midterm and one student had flunked. Now, she didn’t just flunk, it was a 41 or something. And it was no surprise because she spent most of her time pulling her sweater over her nose and looking around at the ceiling of the classroom for the first five weeks of class. She came to me and said, “Is there any way I can pass?” And I said, “No way!” (Not quite that unkindly, but I was a little fed up with her.) And she said the most amazing thing, she said, “You know what? I still feel pretty good about myself. I mean, I think I’m a good student.” And I went, “WHAT!? You are a terrible student. (I didn’t really say it, but I wanted to so badly.) “You’re a terrible student in this class. Maybe in your other classes you’re doing a good job, but you’re not even trying! You’re sitting back there thinking that I’m going to pass you because you sat in that chair for 20 hours. I’m not going to do that to you.” (That’s what I wanted to say, but even I couldn’t say that). But it was amazing to me that in her search for dignity, her search for meaning and significance, she was oblivious to what she really was. And what she needed was a healthy dose of reality, and to learn to take a few notes. I’ve gone on long enough. Hey, I want my kids to feel good about themselves, don’t misunderstand me on this point. But I want them to feel good about themselves because they are good kids. And I want them to understand that they are good kids because God made them good. I want them to understand that they are good kids because Tyler and Kiersten and Hayden were created in the image of a good God. And in that fact lies their dignity. Yes, I want them to feel good about themselves, I want them to achieve their potential, that’s all important. But that’s not who they are, that’s not who I am, that’s not who you are, even if you’re the last person chosen for dodgeball. That’s not who you are. You are the apex of creation. God made this for you and he wanted something that looked like himself, that resembled himself, that could love like he loves, that could think like he thinks, that could dream like he dreams, that could want fellowship like he wants fellowship. And he created you, and he created me. That is dignity and that is the sole source of human dignity, being created in the image of God and being created good.
Yes, the image was damaged, wasn’t it? It was damaged in Genesis 3. Sin came into a good creation. But the image of God is still there. And God loved his creation so much, the image of God meant so much to God, that he willingly sent his Son to die for his creation. He died so that he could redeem us from the pit of hell and draw us to himself. And do you know the end of the process? Do you know why it’s so important to see that “Let us make man in our image” is God the Father and God the Son? Because of I John 3, at the end of the day, when we stand before him and we see him face to face, John tells us that we will be like him. You and I were created in the likeness of God and we have been redeemed from our sin, those of us who have admitted our sin and confessed our faith in Jesus Christ our Savior and given him our lives, what lies ahead is the pure vision of God someday in heaven, where we will see him face to face. And that image of God that was put into us at creation, the crescendo will build and will come to its fulfillment, and I will look like my Savior. And you will look like your Savior.

I’ve been saying all along, that people are the apex of creation, that’s not completely true. Of all that was created, we are the apex and we are the climax. But Genesis 1 does not leave us with that picture because Genesis 1 gives us a radically God-centered view of reality. And it’s such a God-centered view of reality that guess what? You and I are all of equal dignity. Every one of us is of equal worth because every one of us was created in the image of God. Young and old, male and female, American and everyone else. We all share equally in the image of God, but do you know why you ultimately were created? Yes, it was to subdue the earth, it was to have dominion over it, but you know the ultimate, the final reason you were created in the image of God? Isaiah 42, God has been going through and talking about the fact of his salvation and he says, starting in verse 6, “I will say to the north. ‘Give up.’ And to the south, ‘Do not withhold. Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth, everyone who was called by my name, whom I created for my glory.’” This is why the world is so wrong. Dignity and meaning does not come from what we are able to do. Dignity and meaning comes from the fact that I was created as a purposeful act of creation. I was given heaven and earth to subdue, to have dominion over. But ultimately all of us are given the wonderful task of being obedient to God and through that bringing glory to him, the only object, the ONLY object of dignity and worth ultimately in this universe. May we never derive our sense of significance from what we do, may we always derive it from who we are, created ‘good’ in the image of God and redeemed and someday, we will be like him. Our sins are going to be gone, and we’ll be like him.

Let’s pray: Father, when we stop to think about this we confess, well, we just don’t understand it. It’s so hard to understand why someone of your immensity, a God beyond proportion, beyond size would want to create me, to create everyone in this room. But, Father, you did and oh, we are thankful for it. Father, may we see the lie of this world for what it is. May we never measure ourselves on its standards. May we only measure it on your standards and may we understand that we all stand level at the foot of the cross of equal worth, of equal dignity, because of what you did. Father, may we never become the center of this universe, but may we in everything we say and do make you the center of the universe. And through your creation that looks like you, may we join in the anthem of the heavens declaring, “Your glory and the skies

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proclaiming the work of your hands.” Oh Father, may you be glorified truly in who we are and what we do for you. Amen.