

SECTION 3: THE STORIES TO BE TOLD

Lesson 7: The Story of Creation (29)

For the next five lessons, we're going to change direction. But before I tell you where we're going, let me quickly summarize where we've been. The goal of this course, we said in lesson one, was to understand what biblical theology is. But really, we've been doing a little more than that. We've attempted to understand both what biblical theology is, what systematic theology is, and how the two relate to one another. In other words, what we're really interested in is a biblical theology and a theology that's biblical.

Let me see if I can explain that in another way. God has a viewpoint on your life, and on my life, and on all of life. God has a viewpoint on what love really is, on how we speak, on what we do with our possessions, on how we relate to our neighbors, on how we relate to him. Now, in our flesh, we might say we're interested in his viewpoint, but actually we dismiss it. We're only interested in our own viewpoint, and we spend just about every moment of every day sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously justifying that viewpoint.

The Bible presents us with God's viewpoint. The Bible gives us history, like many other books give us history. But unlike any other history ever written, that history is authoritative for our lives. That's why it also gives us propositions of absolute truth in the midst of the historical narrative. The Bible also gives us poetry, which guides us in singing and feeling and grieving, like so many other books of poetry. But unlike any other book of poetry, again, it's authoritative. Here is how you should grieve, rejoice, express fear, and so forth.

So what the Bible does, really, is not just give us God's viewpoint, it allows us to walk with God through the course of human history. That way we can come to believe and trust the words, the viewpoint, and the heart of this one who is leading history. The Bible enables us to see the world through God's eyes.

What we're trying to do in this course, therefore, is trying to understand the nature of this book called the Bible.

- *So we're not just asking, "What does it say? That is, what's the content of the book?" That's the question which drives the Old Testament and New Testament overview.*
- *Nor are we just asking the question, "What should Christians believe about topic "x"—God, man, sin, the end times, abortion, government, and so on?" Those are the questions we addressed in our systematic theology class.*
- *Rather, we're asking something in between those two questions—a question in the middle—which is, "How does the Bible say what it says?" If you don't understand that, you're likely to make mistakes about the first two questions. You're going to misunderstand the content, and you're going to misapply that content to what we should believe.*

This has been what we have been discussing so far: how do we read the Bible, and how does this lead us to the conclusions of what we believe. Along the way, I have given you some tools by teaching you to pay attention to

- the authors original intent of the text,

- the epochal and canonical horizons of any text,
- the Bible’s covenantal storyline,
- matters of promise-fulfillment, which includes multiple horizons of fulfillment,
- the role of typology,
- matters of continuity and discontinuity

And then I showed you how these tools help us to construct doctrine, that is, what we believe. Good systematic theology consists of biblical knowledge, personal knowledge, and situational knowledge. In a sense, we have built the bridge between *what the Bible says* and *what we believe*.

So that’s where we’ve been. Where are we going? In this lesson and over the next four lessons, my goal is to apply what we’ve been talking about. We will consider five different stories that the Bible tells—five different biblical theology storylines. And then we’ll consider how that informs what we believe.

This week, we’re going to consider the story of creation. God’s story begins with creation and it ends with a new creation. This suggests that creation is crucial to understanding who God is and what he is about.

THE STORY OF CREATION (30)

In the Beginning

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).

Genesis 1 provides the cosmic overview. Everything that exists comes into being at God’s command. As we move into Genesis 2, the story focuses tightly on the details of the creation of mankind, the very first marriage, and the responsibilities entrusted to men and women. Everything is good. Everything is perfect. Everything is just as it should be. Then tragedy strikes. Incredibly, Adam and Eve rebel against the One who gave them paradise. In judgment and mercy, God thrusts them out of the perfection of his presence in the garden of Eden, into a created world that is now cursed and fallen.

The Cycle Continues

This process is repeated again in Genesis chapter 6. *God brings judgment in the flood, but he shows mercy by saving Noah and his family. Yet, with Noah’s salvation comes an act of re-creation, at least in part.* God commissions Noah and his family just as he had commissioned Adam. He even echoes Genesis 1 by telling them “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.”

But though the world is externally cleansed and recreated, internally the hearts of men and women are not changed. Sin intervenes once more. So once again, God speaks, and he creates, not a new world, but a new man. *He takes the pagan idolater Abram and, by his irresistible call of love, changes his heart and his name to Abraham. God then promises childless Abraham and his barren wife Sarah that he will make their family into a great nation.* Then, according to God’s promise, not only do they conceive a son, but their grandson has twelve sons. Before long, you can’t even count all their descendants.

By audibly speaking, *God creates Israel as his special people, his chosen nation out of all the peoples of the earth. God also promises to settle the people of Israel in a land flowing with milk and honey, where they can finally rest. Incredibly, the people rebel, not just once, but again and again (Ex 32; Num 11-14, 16, 21, 25).* God judges one generation, letting them die in the desert. Then recreates the nation again with their children. But they too eventually sin, and on and on the story goes. Finally, he scatters them among nations.

The Inauguration of a New Creation (31)

Until one amazing day, the creator himself appears in the form of a man. Echoing Genesis 1, the apostle John tells us,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1-4, 14)

That Word was Jesus, God Incarnate. Through his word, the gospel, Jesus resurrects dead sinners in newness of life and makes them new creatures (Eph 2:1-9). Through his word, the gospel, he calls his people into a new humanity, a holy nation.

The New Creation Consummated (31)

And through his word, the gospel, Jesus the creator will finish his work of new creation. Evil and sin will be finally and forever judged, and God’s people will be purified from all their wickedness and dwell with him in rest forever in a new heaven and a new earth. As John saw it,

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea...There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” (Rev 21:1-5).

PATTERNS IN THE CREATION STORYLINE (32)

That was a super quick overview of the storyline of creation and new creation. And to some extent I’m having to rely on the fact that you know at least some of the details of the story that I didn’t cover. But before we consider what the story teaches us, consider *how* it teaches us.

- 1) First, notice what I’ve already said—*creation plays out as a story*. There’s a beginning—creation. Tension comes to the plot with the fall. The plot gets interesting through all the cycles of creation, sin, judgment, recreation, and so forth. And there’s a climactic ending—the new heavens and the new earth.
- 2) *A pattern of promise and fulfillment ran throughout*. God promised Abraham many descendants, a land, and that he would be a blessing. Clearly, God fulfilled this promised with Isaac, then the

twelve sons of Israel, then the whole nation. But this promise was fulfilled at multiple levels. These many descendants also included the entire nation of Israel.

- 3) In this *we find the covenantal storyline of Scripture* as well. In fact, if I had time, I would have explained the covenants with Noah, Abraham, and David. And taking note of these things is important because where we are in the covenantal storyline will affect our systematic theology conclusions. For instance, suppose someone wanted to argue for the legalization of marijuana by saying that everything God created “was good.” Therefore, plants like marijuana are good. Well, everything God created *was* good...in Genesis 1. But then Genesis 3 happened, changing the world significantly. You can’t just proof text like that.
- 4) Notice also *God’s use of typology* in the storyline of creation. Re-creation after the flood was a type of creation. Calling the nation of Israel out of slavery into the Promised Land was a type of creation. But these type’s pointed toward the antitype, the new creation inaugurated by Christ. Through the repetition of these types, we learn something of how God works and what he cares about.

SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL (32)

So, we’ve heard the story. We’ve briefly considered how the story works. How do we put all this together and apply it to the Christian and the church? Well, let’s highlight several themes and consider how we might think about them in light of how the story works. As we think about the creation story’s significance, I think that several themes become apparent.

God Creates from Nothing

To start with, *God created everything from nothing.*

- Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”
- John 1:3: “Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that has been made.”

What this means is that God is the owner of creation: he made it, it’s his, including you and me. One of the implications of this is that he makes a clear claim on our lives. So consider the systematic applications we can draw from this. We learn about God. He is all powerful. He is creative. He is creator. And he is Lord. We also learn about creation. It has a beginning. It has a purpose. It is good. *Yet it’s as we’re considering the typological pattern of creation throughout the storyline that we realize we’re not just talking about a doctrine of creation. When we get to the New Testament, we’re also talking about the doctrine of salvation. God creates our salvation out of nothing, as it were. We were dead, but he makes us alive. So we’re called “new creations.”*

Or listen to Paul: “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” [*that’s creation*] has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ [*that’s new creation*]” (2 Cor. 4:6). Do you see? God teaches us about our salvation and how it works through Old Testament patterns of creation. Are you tempted to think that you chose God, or that you saved yourself in any way at all? You might even have a New Testament proof text to back you up. But hold on, look at

the storyline of the whole Bible. Consider the fact that God creates out of *nothing* and how that might affect your understanding of salvation. That's exactly what Paul wants you to do in 2 Cor. 4:6.

God Creates By His Word (33)

Okay, another theme from this creation storyline. Not only did God create everything from nothing, *God also created everything by his Word.*

“And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3).

If you and I make something, we need raw material to work with. Not so with God. As Paul says in Romans 4:17, “He calls things that are not as though they were”; and then they are. God creates by speaking.

Whenever and whatever God creates, it's an act of powerful, irresistible grace. The void in Genesis 1 could not resist him. When Ezekiel calls out to the valley of the dry bones with God's Word and Spirit, the bones didn't say to Ezekiel, “We don't want to get up.” When Jesus calls out to the corpse of Lazarus, Lazarus didn't say to Jesus, “Not now, ask me again next year.” No, when the voice of God rings out in gracious, creative power, not even death nor unbelief can resist his power.

Wait a second. *Do you see a typological pattern developing here? Could it be that God is doing things among physical realities to teach us something about spiritual realities? If God's Word effectually creates every time, what do you think happens when Jesus calls out to sinners to come to him? Also, if God's Word effectually creates every time—“my word will not return back to me void,” he says in Isaiah—what do you think churches should do when they gather? Should they concentrate on entertainment or on preaching the Word? Notice what's happening with these various examples I'm giving you. I told you a story about creation. Then I pointed out *how* the story unfolds. And by doing that, we're able to draw systematic theology conclusions. More to the point, we're able to apply this story to our personal lives and our church life together today.*

God Creates For His Glory (33)

Another theme in the story of creation we should notice is that *God creates everything for his glory.* God didn't need to create anything. There is nothing necessary about this universe. But in love and grace, he chose to create everything so that His glory might be the joy and delight of others. As Revelation 4:11 declares, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and *by your will* they were created and have their being.”

Okay, so I read this one text in Revelation and think, “God created things for His glory. That makes sense. We go to church every Sunday and sing hymns of praise. God is all about worship. Fine.” In a sense, it's easy to pull out one text like this, pay it some heed, but then let this basic doctrine sit there. But what if we go back and look at the entire story again. In Genesis 1, we're told that the creation of human beings was different than the rest of creation. Unlike the animals, people—you and me—were created to reflect the very character and glory of God.

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule... (Gen 1:26).

Our entire lives have been created and purposed with imaging the glory of God. That's why we exist. In fact, the Fall in the garden, the law given in Exodus, the kingdom of David, the exile, and the coming of Christ are about this storyline, which is then encapsulated in Revelation 4. All of life and history is about glorifying God. Our very reason for drawing breath today is to glorify God.

In other words, when I build my systematic theology on a more comprehensive biblical theology, it deepens and broadens it. Does it offend you that we and all the rest of creation exist for God's glory? It certainly runs counter to everything inside us. What we need to understand is that this means that the story of creation is fundamentally a love story. God didn't have to create us, but he did. He didn't have to create us as bearers of his image, but he did. In doing so, he gave us a unique ability—the ability to take joy in the highest, most beautiful, most desirable thing imaginable, the glory of God. *God himself loves nothing more than his own glory. There is nothing better or higher to love. There is nothing more beautiful to fall in love with. Out of that same love, he created you and me to participate in his glory as image bearers. The result is that our story is swept up into the greatest story that will ever be known, the story of the unending and unsurpassed glory of God.*

Creation Frustrated In Its Purpose (34)

There's one last theme I want us to notice in this creation story. If we're to understand the story of creation, we need to understand the effect our rebellion has had upon it. To begin with, *because of sin, creation is frustrated in its purpose* to display God's glory.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 8:20 “The creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it.”

Who subjected creation? God did. In response to Adam and Eve's sin, creation would no longer be the pure stage of God's glory. Instead, creation would be both the context of our judgment and at times an agent of God's wrath against us. Far from being an ever-expanding garden of Eden, the world became a place of weeds and thorns, toil and frustration.

But God's curse on creation goes beyond frustrating its purpose. *Because of sin, creation has also been subjected to death.* And that is precisely the sentence God passed: “For dust you are, and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:19). Paul put it this way: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin...in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12).

This world is not the way it's supposed to be. God created it to be a place of joy; we know it to be a source of constant frustration. God created it to be a habitat of life; we know it to be a crucible of death. God created it to be our home; we know it to be our graveyard. We are dead spiritually, and we're going to die physically. There's nothing we can do to change that. And we have no one to blame but ourselves.

All of this bad news was explicit in Genesis 3. But then the storyline plays out these themes of frustration and death over and over as the story continues: Cain in Genesis 4, the world of Noah's day in Genesis 6, the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, and on and on it goes. In some ways the storyline of the entire Old Testament focuses on explaining the sinfulness of humanity and the absolute futility of any solution to creation's demise and human sin that this world might conjure up—whether towers, or mighty nations, or rigorous self-discipline. And from all of this, we draw conclusions for our theology. It helps us understand human nature, the futility of work, even government and the corrupting influence of power.

We can get a doctrine of sin simply by looking at Romans 3:23—“all have sinned” it says. There it is. Isn’t that all there is to say?

Well, remember what I said at the beginning about the fact the Bible gives us an opportunity to walk along with God and humanity, so that we might learn to see what he’s like, and what we’re like? Read the book of Numbers and put yourself in God’s shoes as the Israelites complain over and over and fail to trust God when he has proven over and over that he is trustworthy. Then read the histories of 1 Kings and 2 Kings, and watch the nation turn away from him again and again, while God lovingly sends prophet after prophet to warn them.

Once again, following along the story line like this is going to deepen and broaden your theology—deepen and broaden your understanding of God, yourself, and the world in which we now live. You’ll see patterns emerge and repeat themselves over and over. So when your own child turns two and begins to throw temper tantrums when he doesn’t get his way, you may think of Romans 3:23; but you’ll also think of thousands of years of Israelite history to explain exactly what your child is doing. He’s worshipping an idol. Its name isn’t Baal, but it might as well be Baal. Of course, all this will help to explain your own heart, too, and not just your two year olds.

At the same time, the Old Testament offers us a promise of one who would come and release creation from its captivity. We’re promised a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb, and the leopard with the young calf. And it promises a king who will come to usher in this new creation. Remarkably, however, this king comes and dies in order to usher in His new creation. Is His death totally unexpected? Not if you’ve been reading your Bible typologically. The idea is there from the beginning:

- God kills animals to cover (same word as atone) Adam and Eve’s nakedness.
- God calls Abraham to sacrifice his Son, but then offers a ram.
- Joseph was left for dead, and his “sacrifice” was used to save the world.
- The Passover
- The Levitical Sacrifice

Throughout the story, God is teaching about Himself, about ourselves, and how salvation would come.

CREATION’S GOAL (35)

As I said before, the story of creation really is a love story, the story of a bridegroom who will stop at nothing, not even the cost of his own life, to win for himself a bride, and to present her to himself radiantly beautiful, spotless, and pure. The story ends with the bridegroom preparing a new home for the new couple—a new heaven and a new earth. Unlike Adam with his bride, this bridegroom promises that he will exclude everything from that new home that might spoil or detract from their love.

In that place, there will be no more crying or pain, because there will be no more sin and evil. Only love will be there, as Christ and his bride display the glory of God’s redeeming grace, and the angels watch in awe. We’re not there yet. But we will be. Are you living for that day? Will your story be included in that story? It can be. God’s grace is sufficient and the call of his love is irresistible. Pray that you will have ears to hear God’s voice of love in Christ.