

2. God is Great and God is Good: God Creates and Sustains

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[0 : 00] One of the things I often say to the Cornhill students, and it's only slightly tongue-in-cheek, is that the Bible is divided into two parts.

Not the Old and the New Testament, but Genesis 1, verse 1, and the rest. The whole Bible, in a sense, is an unpacking of Genesis 1, verse 1.

In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. Because the main truth about God is that he is the living God. He is the creator, and that he will finish what he began.

As we look around at creation at the moment, we see not only beauty, but misery. Not only wonder, but despair. And therefore, the big question that arises is, is God going to complete the work?

Is this great work of creation which he made, is this going to be finished? So that's our starting point today. We are back. We're not really back.

[1 : 01] We're flowing from the world of Genesis 1, verse 1. The creator who made heaven and earth. Now, this little series, last week we looked at Psalm 103, which is really about God's providence.

And this psalm, Psalm 104, is about God's creation. Now, these two are not rigidly divided. Obviously, creation, as Calvin said, is the theater of God's glory.

And in that theater, people carry out his will or disobey that will. If you like the actors on the stage, the human actors. This psalm isn't given an author, but Psalm 103 is attributed to David.

And the tremendous, the glorious language of this psalm, the tremendous sweep of its thought, the magnificence of its poetry, suggests very much that David is the author of this as well.

But the other thing to notice is that this God who creates is the God of the covenant. He is the Lord. He is someone who, by creating, in creating the heavens and the earth, he covenants himself to them.

[2 : 08] He covenants himself to finishing that task. So that's the first thing. But the other thing is this. We'll misunderstand this psalm if we simply see it as a celebration of the created order.

And that's how many commentators take it. And indeed, but you'll notice what the first one says. It's not, isn't creation glorious, but, O Lord, my God, you are very great.

And once again, not, look at all the wonderful things, the amazing variety of creation, but rather it says in verse 24, O Lord, how manifold are your works.

In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. I once heard a so-called sermon on this psalm. In which the guy said, well, the language is beautiful.

I can't see anything about it. So I'm just going to show you a series of pictures. And he showed us a series of some very wonderful photography, some very great paintings of the created order.

- [3 : 15] Now, they were beautiful paintings. They were beautiful pictures. But that was missing entirely the point of the psalm. Because that was a kind of vague mysticism and nature worship.
- And if we simply love the created order, then we're in danger of that. Now, don't misunderstand me. I love the beauty of creation. I love the night sky.
- I love seeing the moon on the waters. I love certain landscapes like the Cotswolds, where we were a few weeks ago. These are glorious. These are wonderful. And without them, our lives would be impoverished.
- But we mustn't lapse into a kind of nature worship. Otherwise, we're going to do what Paul says in Romans 1, worship the creature rather than the creator.
- Now, this psalm very clearly follows the structure of Genesis 1. David, if he is the author, has been reading and meditating on Genesis 1.
- [4 : 12] We begin with the creation of light, covering yourself with light, as with a garment, which is the first act of the creator. Let there be light. Then we have the division of the land and the waters.
- We have the sun and the moon, the vegetation and the creatures. Indeed, it follows the pattern of the six days. Now, I'm not going to go into that. You can look at it later, but it's very worth following.
- Many commentators say, what about the seventh day? Well, the seventh day, I'm going to suggest, is there as well in the last verses of the psalm.
- But we'll come to that. So what I want to do now is to look at three contrasts which are at the heart of the psalm. Three things this psalm says about God and the created order to give us a handle on what it's going to say.
- We could go through it verse by verse, comparing it to Genesis 1. But that would be very tedious, I think. And that's the kind of thing that's better done in the study. When you're preaching, it's rather like presenting a meal.
- [5 : 17] It's not like cooking. When you're preaching, when you invite people for a meal, you don't invite them into the kitchen and show them the ingredients. You present the meal with the ingredients as part of it. So we're going to look at this psalm then, three contrasts.
- First of all, that God is both above creation and involved in it. That's the first thing I want to talk about. Secondly, that creation is both a gift and yet must be accepted.
- And thirdly, that creation is not only a present but a future reality. So let's look then, first of all, God is both above creation and involved in it.
- Some of you may have read the vision of Julian of Norwich, who had a vision of the Lord holding in his hand a tiny hazelnut, so small, so fragile, that it looked as if it couldn't exist.
- And she said, Lord, what is that? And he replied, everything that is. We need that view. The God who is far greater than creation. The God whom we worship and bow down before.
- [6 : 24] But also, he is involved in creation. Notice verse 3. He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters. He makes the clouds his chariots. He rides on the wings of the wind.
- He makes his messengers wings and so on. At this point, any Cornhill student worth their salt will tell you that is the God of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.
- The God of Genesis 1 who is up there, transcendent, far above us. And the God of Genesis 2 comes right down into his creation. Not two gods, of course, but two different aspects of the same God.

And the psalmist uses glorious poetry. Now, poetry is not simply a flowery way of saying something. It can be better said in another way. Poetry is using language with intensity, helping us to see into reality.

When Julius Caesar says, The skies are painted with a numbered spark. They are all fire, and everyone doth shine. He's not making a scientific statement. He's opening our eyes to the glory and wonder of the night sky.

[7 : 28] Many, many years ago, I quoted these words to a girl on a beach. She must have liked them because she's now my wife. But, no, that's poetry. And poetry is the kind of language that's used here.

He lays the beams of his chambers in the waters. He makes the clouds his chariots, and so on. Light, which both conceals him and reveals him.

The first act of creation, let there be light. The whole universe is his dwelling place. Now, that ought to save us from calling any building the house of God.

Remember what Solomon said at the high watermark of his spirituality. When the temple had been built in all its magnificence, O Lord, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain you.

How much less this house that I have built. And verse 4 picks up from the end of Psalm 103, making his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire.

[8 : 33] This God is irresistible. His messengers speed from one end of the universe to the other, carrying out his commands. But you'll notice the waters, you'll notice that the waters are terrified of God.

At verse 7, at your rebuke, they fled. Now, the waters in Scripture are often a symbol of the anti-God forces. The abode of Leviathan, the sea monster.

The abode of the evil spirits, the place from which the beasts rise in Daniel chapter 7. And the control of God over the waters, over the hostile waters, is one of the great biblical themes.

And we realize that that gives greater depth to the awestruck question of the disciples in Mark chapter 4. Who then is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him?

Here is a man who can do what only God can do. Who then is this? And there's a reminder of the judgment of the flood. In verse 7 and 8, the mountains rose, the valleys sank down, and so on.

[9 : 47] But also, those very waters which can be hostile are also the source of life and of blessing. Verse 10, You make springs gush forth in the valleys, they flow between the hills, and so on.

This sense of the majesty of God, the glory of God, the great creator, and yet the God who is involved, the God who one day is to come down and take flesh in his creation, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is both one with God and one of us.

Now I want to suggest that if we realize these great twin truths about God, his majesty and his involvement, that will have two particular consequences.

First of all, it will have a consequence in the way we worship and praise God. Now I know the word worship has a wide meaning, but I'm particularly talking about what we do when we meet together.

Now some kind of approaches so emphasize the otherness of God, so emphasize his distance, that he becomes someone whom we have only the remotest concept of.

[11 : 03] Now this kind of thing can so often make us feel that God can only be worshipped in Gothic cathedrals, in a dim religious light, with robes and splendor and pomp and circumstance.

Presbyterianism is good at this as well, in some of its aspects. Every color except black has to be rejected, a kind of grim doorness, to use the Scots word, which makes God utterly remote from our everyday concerns.

On the other hand, and this is very common in evangelicalism, is so emphasizing the involvement of God, that everything becomes chatty and lightweight.

Everything has to be user-friendly. Everything is horizontal. And the result is something rather like breakfast television, a mishmash which neither glorifies God, nor actually really speaks to people's needs.

When we truly worship the God who is both up there and down here, we find the God of the Scripture, who reveals himself in Jesus Christ, the one before whose faces we fall down, the one whose word we tremble, and yet the one who is tender and gentle.

[12 : 22] That a father, as the previous psalm says, shows compassion to his children. That's the God we worship. It will also have effects on our evangelism, I suggest.

Evangelism is not simply about the saving of individual souls. That is vitally important. Nevertheless, evangelism at its truest is not simply going to talk about individuals and their destiny.

It's going to talk about a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. It's such a big and glorious message. It's not just about your destiny and mine, although God in his grace has provided for that.

But that destiny is wonderful beyond all our imagining. We are going to be part of his new creation, part of this wonderful new universe. And it also will remind us that evangelism makes demands on people.

God commands people to repent. He is great. He is awesome. So often the Great Commission is reduced to something like, go into all the world, be nice to everybody. Instead of having a gospel to proclaim, we have insights that we can share.

[13 : 36] Now, this God who presents himself here in the created order and in the gospel, this God is a God who commands everyone to repent.

So the kind of God we believe in, you see, is never simply a theory. It's often easy to say God is transcendent and God is imminent, which is the theological jargon. And we say, oh, very good.

So what? Well, this is the so what. It means the kind of God we believe in will shape our thinking, will shape our living, will shape our worshipping, will shape all our mission.

It will make us the kind of people who can become truly his representatives. That's the first thing then. He is above creation and he's also involved in creation.

The second thing is creation is a gift, but it must be accepted. It must be welcomed. Notice the sense of wonder and gratitude that run through this psalm.

[14 : 35] I will sing to the Lord as long as I live, verse 33. I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. David praises God for his marvelous and varied creation.

This is a great hymn of praise. And in this great hymn of praise, God is expressing his covenant love. Have you ever thought how extravagantly generous creation is?

God doesn't simply deal with us in a niggardly way. All this cataract of light that floods the world, the amazing variety of creation, the beauty and the wonders, his exuberant goodness.

And that, of course, has a great effect on the kind of people we are. If we have narrow and impoverished ideas of God, we're going to be narrow and impoverished people. If we have great ideas of God, then we're going to have a message for the world.

We're going to be able to speak to the hurting and grieving, the lonely, the desperate, and say this is God. You've got a generous covenant keeping God. You'll notice as well in verses 14 to 16, all this generosity and beauty has practical aspects.

- [15 : 48] You cause the grass to grow for livestock and plants for man to cultivate. Notice the old idea, once again, of Genesis 1. Humanity placed in the Garden of Eden to tend, to care for, to cultivate.

It's a gift. It needs to be used. And notice it's not simply necessity. Verse 15, wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine.

And in Isaiah 55, exactly the same metaphor occurs. The gospel is not just bread and water, but it's wine and milk. Luxuries as well as necessities.

God's good created order. And the trees as well, the trees of the Lord, verse 16, are watered abundantly. The cedars of Lebanon that he planted. I have a great love of trees.

I find myself deprived if I'm not living somewhere where there are trees. I used to have a gorgeous walk to work when I lived in Durham because I walked down a woodland path to cross the River Weir.

- [16 : 51] And at every season, particularly in autumn, these trees were glorious. The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly. Not quite the same walking up Renfield Street from Central Station, but then God is good.

These all have their purposes as well. The birds build their nests. Verse 17, the stork has her home. In the fir trees, the high mountains are for the wild goats.

And so on. And then there is the wonderful and glorious sea. Verse 25, here is the sea great and wide. Kidner says that the ships which have turned the oceans into highways instead of barriers.

Here's another example of humanity responding to the generosity of God. And now, of course, with air travel, we have abundant opportunities to travel over the world and see more of it than even David was able to do.

And there's a little detail in verse 26, the Leviathan, which you formed to play in it. Elsewhere, Leviathan is a fearsome adversary of God.

- [17 : 58] Look at Job, particularly in Job 41. Here he is simply a plaything. In the presence of the majesty of God, the threat dwindles. Psalm 95 says the same thing.

The sea is his, for he made it. So we'll have a sense of gratitude. Creation is a gift. Well expressed in verse 24, O Lord, how manifold are your works.

In wisdom, you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures. And this psalm has built into it those wonderful rhythms that God has built into nature, day and night, light and darkness.

Long ago, Willie still wrote a booklet called Rhythms of Rest and Work. I don't think it's still in print, but if you ever get a hold of a copy, it's worth reading because he demonstrates how God has built into his universe those rhythms, those patterns, which you get in Genesis 1, which are really the pattern for living the life that pleases the creator.

And the sense of dependency on God as well. Verse 30, When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground.

- [19 : 22] Notice God doesn't just create, he renews, he keeps on creating. All we do is by his spirit. We remember the words of Isaac Watts, where the whole realm of nature mine.

That were an offering far too small. God has given us this great gift. We need to use it. Now, in recent years, that's been emphasized perhaps more than it has in the past.

And indeed, it's been so emphasized by some people that green issues have been seen as the whole of the gospel. I think it's important to remember that things like green issues and so on are not the gospel.

They are a product of the gospel. If people are saved, if they're forgiven, if they love the Lord, then of course they will care for the created order.

It's not the gospel in itself. It's a consequence of the gospel. And you can hardly read a newspaper or watch a news bulletin and learn something about green issues.

[20 : 24] And that is very biblical if we realize it's true place. That it's not the gospel, but it's a consequence of the gospel. It's a consequence of creation being a gift, but also a gift that has to be used for God's glory.

And finally then, not only is God above creation and in it, not only is creation a gift, but one which must be used, creation is a present and a future reality.

In the beginning, but it's not just in the beginning, God is creating now. At this very moment, God is creating. The fact that we are here living and breathing shows that the spirit is sent forth.

We are created and we are renewed day by day. But the trouble is, there is a discord in creation, isn't there? This Sam doesn't particularly emphasize it the way some others do, but nevertheless, it's there because between Genesis 1 and Psalm 104, Genesis 3 has happened.

There was the fall of Adam and Eve, which wasn't just the fall of humanity, but the fall of the created order. Read back in Genesis 3 about how the earth was now under a curse.

[21 : 48] And that's why, although the earth is still beautiful, it has fallenness, it has a discord running through it. There are deserts, there are dust bowls, there is acid rain, there are earthquakes, there is cancer, there are famines, there is violence.

All of these things are a reality. And that explains the verse that some critics want to remove. Verse 35. Let sinners be consumed from the earth and let the wicked be no more.

Many commentators, when they get to this verse, become embarrassed and start to shuffle and say, well, the psalmist has forgotten his great and glorious and generous view of God and is now descending into judgmentalism.

That's not at all the case. The psalmist realizes that unless there is a judgment, that this discord, this fallenness will continue forever.

There will be a continual swing of the pendulum. The earth and nations, communities, individuals will go through good times and bad times. The pendulum keep on swinging.

[22 : 58] This verse is telling us the pendulum is not going to swing forever because, as I say, there is a seventh day. And that day is the day introduced by the judgment.

The judgment in order for this creation to, not only to recover its wonder, but to exist in an even more glorious and more lasting form.

It is necessary to be a judgment. I want to mention two things. Verse 31, May the glory of the Lord endure forever. May the Lord rejoice in his works.

Now this word glory, one of the great Old Testament words, and it has really two shades of meaning. It comes from a verb meaning to be heavy. What it's saying is God is the utter reality.

God is solid. God, the other word in scripture which you get right throughout Ecclesiastes, the word hevel, which means a puff of wind. God is not a puff of wind.

[23 : 58] That's the word that's so often used about idols. They're a puff of wind. They promise but they don't deliver. So, God is the utter reality.

God is the God who made creation. God is the God who will bring this creation to an end and usher in a better one. And an earlier psalm, Psalm 102, says, Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish but you will remain. God is utterly real. But also, glory means the light of God, this shining, blinding, dazzling light by which we see everything else.

Isaiah had the great vision of the Lord, the earth filled with his glory. And we know this is because of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ which has begun an irreversible move towards the new creation.

See, the whole biblical story hangs together. I want you to think for a moment about that wonderful passage in John 20 in John's resurrection account when Mary Magdalene comes to the garden tomb where the body of Jesus has been laid.

[25 : 07] It's dim, it's dim, it's early morning and in the dusk she sees a figure standing and John says she imagined that he was the gardener and that was exactly right.

that is who he was. He was the gardener come to restore Eden and bring in the new creation. You so often get in John's gospel you get a statement which means one thing on a literal level but throws open a deeper reality.

The gardener had triumphed. Creation was not going to be a desert. Creation was not going to be chaos. The gardener had died and risen again to bring in the new creation.

The fulfillment of Genesis 1 verse 1. And the other thing is this. We have here although David didn't fully see it the seventh day.

That's why he says may the glory of the Lord endure forever. Now I know people will say that forever means something just like for a long time.

[26 : 12] that's just playing with words. When David says forever he means forever. He means something that will go on beyond his own lifetime. You get this in so many of his other sounds where he talks about the resurrection beyond death.

This is David here is looking forward to the day of the Lord that the prophets speak about. The day of Christ as the New Testament calls it. The day of the new creation.

when the living word who was there at the beginning remember John again the word was the one through whom all things were created. And that is the one who will usher in the new creation.

That's the one who will bring a creation that is so glorious and so wonderful that we can't begin to imagine it. God is good even today on a day like this on a wonderful sunny morning we can see the daily scene is big with the promise of the new creation.

But we know there are fallenness we know there are flaws we know there is sin. But one day this glorious new creation which will last forever will be ushered in.

[27 : 25] And what better can we say than David says bless the Lord O my soul. Let's pray. O God our Father creator and redeemer Lord of the past the present and the future the covenant making and the covenant keeping God how we praise you for this creation that you have made this wonderful world you have created for us and yet we weep over its fallenness its sinfulness and its brokenness and so we look forward to the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

Amen.