

The Beginning of Life As We Know It

Today we begin “The Story” our journey through the Scriptures from the inaugural “In the beginning” of Genesis all the way to the final “Come Lord Jesus” at the end of Revelation. Obviously we will not cover every detail in between; that is not our goal. Our goal is to see the big picture, the continuing narrative that makes the books of the Bible more than a library of 66 ancient religious documents, but one grand story. For that is what we believe about the Bible. It is more than the writings of holy men. It is God-breathed so that even though written over thousands of years by numerous authors in multiple nations speaking different languages addressing historically unique problems and situations, still behind and above and under and through it all there is being told one grand story. It is a love story of how the Creator brought into existence a universe of delight to be entrusted to a man and a woman that he had uniquely fashioned to be a reflection of his own image, only to see this pristine paradise lost and ruined by their sin. But, rather than throw away this world he puts into place a plan to rescue it, a rescue as marvelously designed as the world it was designed to save, a rescue which required him to enter the very world he created so he could become not only its creator but in an unprecedented and unimaginable act of dying love also become its Savior. This is the story Jesus told to those sad

and disheartened disciples walking down the road to Emmaus. They were devastated because the one they had put their hope in had been crucified. But they walking in the wrong story, they knew the Scriptures but they had missed the story. And so Jesus gently scolded them, *How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?*” *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24).* In other words, Jesus told them the Story.

And so, just like Jesus, this morning we too begin with Moses who the scriptures tell us is the one who first wrote Genesis. And if we are to understand what Genesis is all about and especially its first two chapters, it is important to understand the task that confronted Moses. The first principle in interpreting any Bible passage is always to first ask one critically important question. “What did these scriptures mean to the people for whom they were first written.” Before we can make sense of any truths the Bible may have to say to us, we must first understand the truths it was saying to the people to whom it was originally written.

So, to understand these first chapters of the first book of the Bible that tell us of the first moments of the beginning of life as we know it, we need to

first travel forward in time several hundreds of years to the time of Moses and try to understand what Moses was up to when he first wrote these words.

To put it simply, Moses was called by God to deliver his people from bondage to Egypt, a land they had lived in for several hundred years. But Israel's bondage was much more than physical; it had become spiritual. For hundreds of years they had been immersed in a culture, a worldview, a story whose understanding of God and man and the world and how all of this came to be was profoundly different than the story that had given birth to the people of Israel. This generation of Israelites was the first to make a mistake that would be repeated again and again by the generations that would follow them, the mistake of forgetting their story.

It was this generation of Israel to which the psalmist refers in the 78th psalm when he exhorts Israel's parents *to teach their children... the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power and the wonders that he has done... so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands...* so that they would not be like their ancestors, *a stubborn and rebellious generation whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him* (Psalm 78:6-8). That rebellious generation was the

generation Moses was sent by God to deliver. But Moses' job was not just to get Israel out of Egypt; more important was to get Egypt out of Israel.

Genesis was the first of five books Moses would write to tell Israel her story and help her to understand again just who their God was and what it meant to be his people. And in the beginning of the book we call Genesis Moses begins to tell Israel her story about the beginning of life, as we know it. It was certainly different than Egypt's story, which we can assume, after several hundred years of Egyptian influence and oppression, had begun to seep into the minds of the Israelites. According to the Egyptian creation story there were many gods taking the form of different parts of nature, the sun, the moon, the sky and the earth, the animals and vegetation even some humans, like the Pharaoh, could be a god.

In fact, in every other ancient story of the beginning of life as we know it, the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian tale of Marduk, and certainly the Egyptian creation stories, "life as we know it" comes about by gods giving birth to other gods, or gods going to war against each other, or gods in various ways acting pretty much like humans. In all the other creation stories surrounding Israel, and there have been many, the gods had little use for people, at best treating them as insignificant and irritating little beings, at worse terrorizing and tormenting them. Ancient

people often saw floods and storms and earthquakes and droughts and plagues and all the other seasonal catastrophes as the fury of angry and jealous and capricious gods sometimes arguing with each other sometimes pouring out their wrath on the people below. And so ancient people lived in fear of gods who cared little about them; they offered sacrifices to appease the gods; but most of all they just hoped the gods would leave them alone. In the ancient world, the heavens and the earth, animals and plants, rivers and mountains, the sun and the moon and the stars were all fearful gods to be worshipped.

It is clear from what Moses writes in Deuteronomy that the Israelites were tempted to think like Egyptians. Moses says to them, *Beware lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and worship them and serve them, things which the Lord your God has allotted to all the people under the whole earth.* Moses is sent not only to deliver Israel, but also to deliver to Israel a profoundly different story about the beginning of life as we know it; to tell Israel that her god, Yahweh, is not one god among many, but the one and only; to tell Israel that her God does not think people are irritating and insignificant little beings, but are in fact marvelous and wondrous beings that have been divinely fashioned to reflect the image and glory of Yahweh

himself; to tell Israel how foolish it is to worship the sky or the land or the sun or the moon or the stars since all of these are nothing more than the handiwork and creation of their God, Yahweh. Of all the extraordinary and miraculous events that are recorded in the holy scriptures, none are as extraordinary or miraculous as the very existence of an ancient people who believed in one God not many, who exists above and apart from nature not as a force within it, and who sees people not as insignificant but instead as worthy of entering into an intimate relationship. Skeptics often point out the similarities between Genesis and the other ancient creation stories, and there are many. One would expect there to be. What is totally unexpected and unprecedented and extraordinary is the absolutely unique differences in the story of Genesis. There is nothing remotely like it in all the ancient world.

As we read through the first two chapters of Genesis we see the so-called “gods” of Egypt dismissed one by one, no longer worshiped as divine but now seen as divinely created by the one God who alone is to be worshiped, the creator of all things, Yahweh. On the first day the gods of light and darkness, on the second day the gods of the sea, on the third day the gods of earth and vegetation, on the fourth day the sun, moon and stars, on the fifth day all the animals, so many worshipped as gods by the Egyptians, are all de-deified and returned to their rightful status as creations

of the one true God, Yahweh. And then comes the sixth day when Moses not only makes it clear that no man can be God, as Pharaoh proclaimed himself to be, but all humanity, men and women alike, are equally created in the image of God, equally given dominion over the earth. In Egypt the Pharaoh and his sons are the only people who can be gods, and all others must serve him. Moses tells Israel that all people are created in the image and likeness of God, a God who desires to be a servant to us.

What an incredible story we are given in Genesis, one that is unlike any other in the ancient world. Ancient people feared natural forces as capricious, unpredictable, malevolent, but the God of Genesis created order out of chaos, fashioned a uniquely hospitable habitat, a lush, garden paradise of delights for man. The ancients had human-like gods, jealous and fickle and apathetic toward man, but the God of Genesis deeply loved the people he created, desiring to walk with them and dwell with them in a garden paradise. Overwhelmingly these first two chapters tell us that Yahweh is the one and only God, vastly more powerful than all the natural forces, intensely involved in the world he created and desirous to have a relationship with what he considers absolutely the greatest of all his creations, us!

And yet, consistently throughout the Scriptures men and women fail to comprehend this message. Rather than respond to God in profound

thanksgiving and worship and dependence, man persistently chooses to devote himself to practically anything else but God. Beginning with our ancient parents who, rather than be content to eat of the tree of life, chose instead the forbidden fruit, following their own way and consequently forfeiting their home in the garden. What follows the glorious beginning of our story in the first two chapters of Genesis is a painful read: a story of jealousy, a story of murder, a story of banishment, a story of societal corruption, a story of world wide destruction, a story of shameful drunkenness, a story of confusion and human division.

In Genesis Moses tells Israel the beginning of her story, not just the beginning of the good things but also the beginning of all the bad things that come when people reject God's gracious gifts to pursue their own way. Surely one reason Moses tells Israel this story is to let Israel know the roots of her own wickedness and sin and her need to be a holy people. To get Israel out of Egypt would require a miraculous journey; Moses would lead Israel through the Red Sea. To get Egypt out of Israel would require a much longer journey and ultimately a much greater miracle. Moses would need to lead them all the way back to the beginning to meet the God who created them, to discover the kind of world they lived in and to learn what kind of people they were created to be. It would be many years later before the

greatest of all miracles would come when one greater than Moses would bring the final deliverance not just for Israel but for the whole world.

The story of Genesis accomplished the same for us today. Like Israel of old, we too live surrounded by profoundly different stories about the beginning of life as we know it with explanations and understandings about our world and ourselves and our God that are not true. These days we're not encouraged to believe that the sun and the moon and stars are all gods. We're told to believe that the sun and the moon and the stars came to be without God at all. The story that surrounds us is a tale of chance and accidents and meaningless, irrational, blind fate. The story that surrounds us tells us this cosmos was not designed and it certainly was not designed for us. In the story that surrounds us, we are told that we are not at home in the universe, we are lost in the cosmos. In the story that surrounds us, we are not created in the image of a righteous and loving and gracious god, we are hardly more than the beasts, the results of impersonal, amoral and brutal forces. With such a story, is it any wonder, that society today increasingly reflects less the goodness of God and more the brutality of beasts. After all, people act according to the scripts of their story.

Like Israel of old, we need more than simply to get out of Egypt. We must get Egypt out of us. We need to know our story and especially to know

those first two chapters of our story. For we did not accidentally arrive on this planet. Each of us has been lovingly shaped and fashioned by a divine hand and particularly placed into this world with a divine purpose. This planet is not a mere pile of primeval spare parts haphazardly heaped together, this planet is our home, damaged and defaced for sure by our sin, but destined for a dazzling divine makeover and to be restored to its pristine glory. Until then it has been placed lovingly into our care to be wisely tended and husbanded. This existence of a few decades is not merely an opportunity to fill every minute of every day pursuing every selfish pleasure we can dream up, but instead to reflect in every way the very image of our creator, to display the rich, affirming, satisfying glory that is his life rather than rebelliously reaching out for every forbidden fruit within our grasp.

Our story is a grand adventure, calling us to explore and contemplate the endless wonders of creation. Our story is an intriguing mystery. We been given already the glorious beginning and ending chapters, and now we watch with eager expectation as God writes the middle chapters and we wonder how God will one day bring it all together. But more than anything else our story is a love story, the love of an eternal father who created us, an eternal son who journeyed through time to save us, the love of a Holy Spirit who has taken up residence in us to transform us and hopefully it is the story

of the responding love of a deeply thankful creation that is yearning for the end of the story to come when we are finally restored to the kind of dwelling place in which we were originally meant to reside, an ending which we are told by John will be very much like it was “in the beginning.”

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. 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!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true... “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.