

*Genesis 1; Matthew 1; Ezra 1; Acts 1*



ALL FOUR OF THESE CHAPTERS DEPICT NEW BEGINNINGS, but the first reading—**Genesis 1**—portrays the beginning of everything in this created universe.

On the face of it, this chapter, and the lines of thought it develops, establish that God is different from the universe that he creates, and therefore pantheism is ruled out; that the original creation was entirely good, and therefore dualism is ruled out; that human beings, male and female together, are alone declared to be made in the image of God, and therefore forms of reductionism that claim we are part of the animal kingdom *and no more* must be ruled out; that God is a talking God, and therefore all notions of an impersonal God must be ruled out; that this God has sovereignly made all things, including all people, and therefore conceptions of merely tribal deities must be ruled out.

Some of these and other matters are put positively by later writers of Scripture who, reflecting on the doctrine of creation, offer a host of invaluable conclusions. The sheer glory of the created order bears telling witness to the glory of its Maker (Ps. 19). The universe came into being by the will of God, and for this, God is incessantly worshiped (Rev. 4:11). That God has made everything speaks of his transcendence, i.e., he is above this created order, above time and space, and therefore cannot be domesticated by anything in it (Acts 17:24-25). That he made all things and continues to rule over all, means that both racism and tribalism are to be rejected (Acts 17:26). Further, if we ourselves have been made in his image, it is preposterous to think that God can properly be pictured by some image that we can concoct (Acts 17:29). These notions and more are teased out by later Scriptures.

One of the most important entailments of the doctrine of creation is this: it grounds all human responsibility. The theme repeatedly recurs in the Bible, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by implication. To take but one example, John's gospel opens by declaring that everything that was created came into being by the agency of God's "Word," the Word that became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:2-3, 14). But this observation sets the stage for a devastating indictment: when this Word came into the world, *and even though the world was made through him*, the world did not recognize him (John 1:10). God made us to "image" himself; he made us for his own glory. For us to imagine ourselves autonomous is, far from being a measure of our maturity, the supreme mark of our rebellion, the flag of our suppression of the truth (Rom. 1).



*Genesis 2; Matthew 2; Ezra 2; Acts 2*



WHAT A STRANGE WAY, we might think, to end this account of Creation: “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen. 2:25). Hollywood would love it: what an excuse for sexual titillation if someone tries to place the scene on the big screen. We hurry on, chasing the narrative.

Yet the verse is strategically placed. It links the account of the creation of woman and the establishment of marriage (Gen. 2:18-24) with the account of the Fall (Gen. 3). On the one hand, the Bible tells us that woman was taken from man, made by God to be “a helper suitable for him” (2:18), yet doubly one with him: she is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (2:23), and now the two are united as one in marriage, one flesh (2:24), the paradigm of marriages to come, of new homes and new families. On the other hand, in the next chapter we read of the Fall, the wretched rebellion that introduces death and the curse. Part of that account, as we glean from tomorrow’s reading, finds the man and the woman hiding from the presence of the Lord, because their rebellion opened their eyes to their nakedness (3:7, 10). Far from being unashamed, their instinct is to hide.

This was not how it was supposed to be. In the beginning, “the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” The sexual arena stands to the fore, of course; yet there is a symbol-laden depth to the pronouncement. It is a way of saying that there was no guilt; there was nothing to be ashamed of. This happy innocence meant openness, utter candor. There was nothing to hide, whether from God or from each other.

How different after the Fall. The man and the woman hide from God, and blame others. The candor has gone, the innocence has dissipated, the openness has closed. These are the immediate effects of the first sin.

How much more dire are the same effects worked into the psyche of a fallen race, worked into individuals like you and me with so much to hide. Would you want your spouse or your best friend to know the full dimensions of each of your thoughts? Would you want your motives placarded for public display? Have we not done things of which we are so ashamed that we want as few people as possible to know about them? Even the person whose conscience is said to be “seared” (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:2) and who therefore boasts of his sin does so only in some arenas, but not in others.

What astonishing dimensions characterize the salvation that addresses problems as deep as these.



*Genesis 3; Matthew 3; Ezra 3; Acts 3*



IN ANY DOMAIN, we are unlikely to agree as to what the solution of a problem is, unless we agree as to the nature of the problem.

The religions of the world offer an enormous range of solutions to human problems. Some promulgate various forms of religious self-help exercises; some advocate a kind of faithful fatalism; others urge tapping into an impersonal energy or force in the universe; still others claim that mystical experiences are available to those who pursue them, experiences that relativize all evil. One of the critical questions to ask is this: What constitutes the irreducible heart of human problems?

The Bible insists that the heart of all human problems is rebellion against the God who is our Maker, whose image we bear, and whose rule we seek to overthrow. All of our problems, without exception, can be traced to this fundamental source: our rebellion and the just curse of God that we have attracted by our rebellion.

This must not be (mis)understood in some simplistic sense. It is not necessarily the case that the greatest rebels in this world suffer the greatest pain in this world, on some simple tit-for-tat scheme. But whether we are perpetrators (as in hate, jealousy, lust, or theft) or victims (as in rape, battery, or indiscriminate bombing), our plight is tied to sin—ours or that of others. Further, whether our misery is the result of explicit human malice or the fruit of a “natural” disaster, **Genesis 3** insists that this is a disordered world, a broken world—and that this state of affairs has come about because of human rebellion.

God’s curses on the human pair are striking. The first (Gen. 3:16), which promises pain in childbearing and disordered marriages, is the disruption of the first designated task human beings were assigned before the Fall: male and female, in the blessing of God, being fruitful and increasing in number (1:27-28). The second (Gen. 3:17-19), which promises painful toil, a disordered ecology, and certain death, is the disruption of the second designated task human beings were assigned before the Fall: God’s image-bearers ruling over the created order and living in harmony with it (1:28-30).

With perfect justice God might have destroyed this rebel breed instantly. He can no more ignore such rebellion than he can deny his own deity. Yet in mercy he clothes them, suspends part of the sentence (death itself)—and foretells a time when the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent who led the first couple astray. One reads Revelation 12 with relief, and grasps that Genesis 3 defines the problem that only Christ can meet.



Genesis 4; Matthew 4; Ezra 4; Acts 4



IT TOOK ONLY ONE GENERATION for the human race to produce its first murderer (Gen. 4). Two reflections:

(1) *In the Bible, there are many motives behind murder.* Jehu killed for political advantage (2 Kings 9–10); David killed to cover up his adultery (2 Sam. 11); Joab murdered out of revenge, and out of the fear of having his privileged position usurped (2 Sam. 3); some of the men of Gibeah in Benjamin killed out of unbri-dled lust (Judg. 19). It would be easy to enlarge the list. On the occasion of the first murder, the motive was sibling rivalry out of control. Cain could not bear to think that his brother Abel's offering was acceptable to God, while his own was not. Instead of seeking God so as to improve his own sacrifice, he killed the man he saw as his rival.

What is common to all these motives is the assumption entertained by the murderer that he or she is at the center of the universe. Even God must approve what I do; if not, since I cannot kill God, I will kill those whom God approves. Instead of the glorious situation that obtained before the Fall, when in the minds of God's image-bearers, God himself was at the center, and loved and cherished as our good and wise Maker and Ruler, now each individual wants to be the center of the universe, as if saying, "Even God must serve me. If he does not, perhaps it is time to invent new gods. . . ."

Among the shocking elements in the murder of Cain is the stark fact that Cain's nose is out of joint *because he does not have God's approval*. The fatal sibling rivalry lies in this instance in the domain of religion. No matter: once I insist on being number one, I must be number one in every domain. Sad to tell, if the constraints of culture and fear of the penal system restrain me from outright murder, they are unlikely to restrain me from the kind of hate that the Lord Jesus insists is of the same moral order as murder (Matt. 5:21-26). So while the motives for murder are superficially many, at heart they become one: I wish to be god. And that is the supreme idolatry.

(2) *In the Bible, the innocent are sometimes murdered.* In this account, Abel is the righteous brother, yet he is the one who is murdered. From this fact we must reflect on two things. First, the Bible is utterly realistic about the horrible cruelty and unfairness of sin. Second, already by way of anticipation, we quietly recognize that if ultimate redress and justice are possible, God must intervene—and the books can only finally be squared after death.



Genesis 5; Matthew 5; Ezra 5; Acts 5



AGAIN AND AGAIN IN THE FIFTH CHAPTER OF GENESIS, one finds the refrain, “and then he died.” So-and-so lived so many years, *and then he died . . . and then he died . . . and then he died*. . . Why the repetition?

From the beginning, God’s intention had been that the intercourse between himself and his image-bearers would be eternal: Adam and Eve were to experience eternal life with God. Their rebellion put an end to this trajectory (Gen. 3:21-22). Even if death did not fall on them immediately (Adam lived to the age of 930, according to Gen. 5:5), it was inevitable. The chapter before this table of deaths records the first murder—another death. And the three succeeding chapters (Gen. 6–8) record the Flood, in which the human race dies, save only Noah and his family. Whether by murder or by immediate divine judgment or by old age, the result is always the same: “and then he died.” As the wry contemporary expression puts it, “Life is hard, and then you die.”

In fact, by God’s just decree, death is taking hold of the human race. The life spans in Genesis 5 are extraordinary. They cannot last: more years means more evil. By Genesis 6:3, God determines to cut short the life span of his rebellious image-bearers. This decision is implemented gradually but firmly, so that by Genesis 11 the recorded ages have declined considerably, and in later records very few live longer than 120 years. But whatever the age, the final result is the same: “and then he died.”

Contemporary Western thought finds death so frightening that in polite conversation it is the last taboo. Nowadays one can chatter on about sex and finances, and never raise an eyebrow; mention death, and most people are uncomfortable at best. Even many Christians think of their faith almost exclusively in terms of what it does for them *now*, rather than in terms of preparing them for eternity such that it transforms how they live now.

God does not want us to shut our eyes to the effects of our sin, to the inevitability of death. Nevertheless, this chapter includes one bright exception: “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Gen. 5:24). It is almost as if God is showing that death is not ontologically necessary; that those who walk with God one day escape death; that even for those who die, there is hope—in God’s grace—of life beyond our inevitable death. But it is tied to a walk with God. It will take the rest of the Bible to unpack what that means.



*Genesis 6; Matthew 6; Ezra 6; Acts 6*



THE FIRST THREE SECTIONS OF MATTHEW 6 (which itself is the central chapter of the Sermon on the Mount) deal with three fundamental acts of piety in Judaism: giving to the needy (traditionally called “alms-giving”), prayer, and fasting (Matt. 6:1-18). The common link is striking: Jesus recognizes how easy it is for sinners to engage in worthy, philanthropic and even religious activities, less in order to do what is right than to be admired for doing what is right. If being thought generous is more important than being generous, if gaining a reputation for prayerfulness is more important to us than praying when no one but God is listening, if fasting is something in which we engage only if we can disingenuously talk about it, then these acts of piety become acts of impiety.

The fundamental way to check out how sound we are in each of these areas is to perform these acts so quietly that none but God knows we are doing them. So be generous, but tell no one what you are giving (6:1-4). Insist that even the recipients be silent. Pray far more in secret than you do in public (6:5-8). By all means, fast—but tell no one you are doing so (6:16-18). As for the middle item in these three traditional acts of piety, there is a further test: do not bother to ask your heavenly Father for forgiveness where you yourself are unwilling to forgive (6:14-15).

In each of these three traditional acts of piety, genuine Christian living is characterized by a simple yet profound desire to please God, and not by the ostentation that is in reality more interested in generating the impression among our peers that we are pleasing God.

The last two sections of the chapter continue this probing of our innermost motives. (1) In the first, Jesus tells us to store up treasure in heaven, for our hearts will inevitably pursue our treasure. What we ultimately value will tug at our “hearts”—our personalities, our dreams, our time, our imaginations, our inmost beings—and we will pursue it. That thing becomes our god. If what we value is merely material, our god is materialism. But if all we cherish most belongs to the eternal realm, then our whole being will pursue what is of transcendent significance. (2) In the second, Jesus tells us that a true and faithful relationship with God refuses to indulge in endless, needless fretting. We can trust God—his wisdom, his goodness, his providential ordering of things—even in this broken, evil world. Not to trust him betrays the pagan character of our hearts.

In short: seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness (6:33).

