

HOPELESS WITHOUT GOD

Genesis 1-11

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In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And it was good, it was very good. And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” But the shrewd serpent said to the human couple, “You will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.” So Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and hid in shame from the God who had made them. And the LORD God said, “The humans have now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. They must not be allowed to reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.¹ Paradise was lost, and the world began its plunge into hell. The resentful Cain murdered his righteous brother Abel, and Lamech boasted of his bigamy and brutality.² Lust consumed creation as heavenly beings intermarried with human beings, causing God to lament. The LORD God was sorry that He had made mortals, and His heart was filled with pain. So He wiped away the wickedness by washing the world with the waters of a flood. Fortunately, Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD, and

¹Gen 1:1, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 27-29, 31; 2:8-9, 15-17; 3:1, 4-8, 22-24.

²Gen 4.

those aboard the ark were spared.³ But in spite of the fresh start granted to the world, a fatal flaw remained: humans. Creation was clean, but the creature God had put in charge was corrupt. In a drunken stupor Noah lay naked in his tent where his perverse son Ham disgraced him. The sober and sodomized Noah cursed the descendants of Ham.⁴ In time, the whole world proudly proclaimed, “Come, let us build a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” And once again, the Creator was called upon to judge His creation. So the LORD God turned the Babel builders into babbling blunderers and banished them to the four corners of the earth.⁵ Such are the beginnings of human history according to the first eleven chapters of the Bible.

The Book of Genesis is an ancient book: it addresses the issues of the 2nd millennium B.C. This “obvious” point is often overlooked in modern-day discussions where the text is tortured to yield answers to questions that were not raised in the ancient oriental world. Genesis 1-11 is a tract for the times, challenging ancient assumptions about the nature of God, the nature of the world, and the nature of mankind. These chapters affirm the oneness and unity of God to a world that believed in a multitude of gods who were always striving among themselves for superiority. They affirm that God is fair rather than fickle; that He is powerful as opposed to being powerless; and that He cares for humans rather than exploiting them. And whereas Mesopotamia clung to the wisdom of primeval mankind, Genesis records mankind’s sinful disobedience. Genesis 1-11 denies the polytheistic optimism of the ancient Near East, for it depicts humanity’s situation as hopeless without the mercy of the single, sovereign Creator. Without God there is no hope for man.⁶

The first eleven chapters of Genesis provide the background for chapters twelve through fifty. God’s promises to Abraham begin to repair the hopeless situation of humanity. The patriarchs are men through whom the world will be redeemed, and the God who reveals Himself to them is no mere tribal deity but is the creator of the whole

³Gen 6-9:17.

⁴Gen 9:20-27.

⁵Gen 11:1-9.

⁶Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC, vol. 1 (Word, 1987), xlv-1.

universe. The message of Genesis is a message of redemption: chapters 3-11 explain why we need salvation and what we need to be saved from; chapters 1-2 show us the original condition of creation which is also the goal of redemption; and chapters 12-50 hold out the hope that we and the world will one day return to paradise when the patriarchal promises are completely fulfilled.⁷

But if Genesis 1-11 is at odds with the polytheistic optimism of the ancient world, it is also at odds with the humanistic secularism of the modern world. It contradicts the ideologies of civilized men and women, past and present, who suppose their own efforts will ultimately suffice to save them. It declares that mankind is without hope if individuals are without God; that human society will disintegrate where divine law is not respected and divine mercy not realized. And yet Genesis, so pessimistic about mankind without God, is essentially optimistic, precisely because God created men and women in His own image and revealed His ideal for humanity at the beginning of time. Through Noah's obedience mankind's future was secured, and in the promise to the patriarchs the ultimate fulfillment of God's ideals for humanity is guaranteed.⁸

In Gen 8:21-22, a remarkable resolution of God is recorded. Noah's family and the animals have disembarked from the ark. Noah builds an altar and sacrifices burnt offerings to the LORD. We read:

²¹The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.

²²"As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
will never cease" (Gen 8:21-22, NIV).

Remember, God had brought the flood upon creation *because* "every inclination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5). Now, after the flood, God resolves to never do such a thing again *even though* "every inclination of man's heart is evil from childhood" (Gen 8:21). The flood has caused no change in man, but it has

⁷Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 1-lii.

⁸Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, lii-liii.

caused an irreversible change in God. The relationship between the Creator and His creation is not simply that of a strong God and a needy world. It is now a tortured relationship between a grieved God and a resistant world. God decides to endure a wicked world which means that God will continue to grieve. God thus decides to suffer for the sake of the future of the world.⁹ “The world continues to live and breathe because God makes a gracious, unconditional commitment to stay with the world, come what may in the wake of human sinfulness.”¹⁰ The fallenness of creation cannot overcome the faithfulness of its Creator. That is the gospel of grace according to Genesis.

But there is more. Since God rejects annihilation as the means to accomplish mankind’s reformation, He must find a new way of engaging evil. God refuses to accept humanity’s normal way of sinful living and He works to reverse what has become “normal.” Mankind must become a partner with God for the sake of its salvation. So God calls Abraham through whom He will provide potential redemption for all the nations of the world. Now, God will not change things without human cooperation, and humans cannot change without divine assistance. Only when choosing to grow in partnership with God will humans recover the lost companionship with God and with one another.¹¹

Please turn from the beginning of your Bible to the end of your Bible—Rev 21:1. The Apostle John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more (Rev 21:1, NRSV).

“The sea was no more”—the waters of the primeval abyss that represent the source of destructive evil are finally no more. The “watery abyss” or “the deep”—it is something like what little children fear is under their bed: monsters live there. In the Flood, God uncreated creation by reverting the cosmos back to chaos. He unleashed upon the old world the demons of the deep. In the coming new world, God does not merely protect it from a second Flood—as He promised to Noah—He goes beyond that by removing even the threat of destructive evil, for “the sea” is no more. The new creation is eternally

⁹Terence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis*, NIB, vol. 1 (Abingdon, 1994), 395-396.

¹⁰Fretheim, *Genesis*, 337.

¹¹Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (InterVartityPress, 2001), 16, 36, 38.

secure for there is absolutely nothing in existence that can threaten it. Only then does it become the home of God who indwells it with the splendor of His divine glory.¹²

²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them as their God;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new” (Rev 21:2-5a, NRSV).

We exist because of God’s gift of life. We continue to exist because of God’s gift of grace. God is good; we are not. We are no more able to make ourselves good than we were able to bring about our own birth. We must be born again. And the second birth is like the first birth in that both are the work of God. God is good and He is able to make us good if we will let Him.

Sometimes this world in which we live seems to make no sense. Sometimes we struggle and search for something in which to hope. Sometimes we feel trapped in the middle of a movie that has no meaning. But life is no man-made movie, and this is what gives us hope. We know how this movie began and we know how this movie will end. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’”¹³ The world to come, it is the ultimate realization of all of our hopes for God *and* all of God’s hopes for us.

¹²Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 52-53.

¹³Gen 1:1; Rev 21:1, 5.