

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 3: From the Beginning (Genesis 1 & 2)

by Virgil Thompson

From the Beginning

Not surprisingly, the Bible begins with the story of God's creation. In fact, the Bible begins with two stories of creation. These stories are packed tight, brimming over with the fullness of God's gracious goodness. Luther captures the promise of these stories for faith in the *Small Catechism's* explanation of the First Article of the *Apostles' Creed*: "I believe that God has created me and all that exists ... all this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, though I do not deserve it." With Luther as our guide, let's take a closer look at the promise of these stories for faith.

Paradise of God's Goodness and Mercy

The story of God's creation in Genesis 1 and 2 takes us back to paradise before the unfortunate controversy between science and religion. This controversy: 1) distracts from the promise of the story for faith; and 2) poses an impossible choice. Too often people take sides in the controversy as though we must choose between the Bible and science, creation and evolution. In reality, both science and the Bible are necessary to the life of faith. The real question concerns how science and Bible relate to one another. Fortunately, the great cloud of witness that has gone before us offers help in sorting out the relationship. Luther's view, for example, puts Bible and science, faith and reason in proper perspective. Genesis 1 & 2 take us deep into the story of God's good creation and its promise for faith.

It would be impossible to miss the main point of the story. People sometimes lament that you can never know for sure about God. It may be true that God sometimes hides from us, but if so, it is only that we should seek Him where He has come into the clear light of day to reveal Himself as He seeks to be known. That's what these Bible stories of creation are written to show and tell. "Let there be light," God declares (Gen. 1:3). And there is light.

First and most important, the Bible wants us to see that God freely gives. Solely out of His fatherly and divine

goodness He brings forth a creation teeming with goodness and richness. In great abundance God provides everything necessary to life—day and night, earth and sky, food and clothing, home and family, daily work—all we need. The Lutheran poet, Herb Brokering, wrote a beautiful hymn praising God and basking in the wonder, beauty and fullness of God's creation. You may catch the congregation singing it on YouTube; in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* it is number 558.¹ The hymn sings the truth of the Biblical story. We owe everything we have and are to God's gracious goodness toward us. As Luther says in the *Small Catechism*, it stands to reason that "we ought to thank and praise, serve and obey God" for all his gracious goodness, which we enjoy daily.

The Command to Have Dominion

Not only has God created us to enjoy creation, but also to take care of it. "Let us make human kind in our image ... let them have dominion over ... all the earth," God declares of the human creation (1:26). In other words, God puts us to work taking care of His creation.

The command to have dominion has recently become problematic in the imagination of many Bible readers. Humanity, all too automatically, seems to equate dominion with exploitation. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence that humans have practiced a self-centered approach to exercising dominion over the earth. It is understandable that critics of the Bible blame the command of God for the mess that humans have made of the planet. We humans frequently blame someone else for the trouble that we get ourselves into.

The problem, however, is not in God's command to have dominion. The problem is in us. Fuller explanation of human sinful exploitation must be postponed to the next session, which circles around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here it is enough to confess that our selfish exploitation

stems from loss of faith in the promise of God’s gracious goodness. The problem of sinful exploitation will be resolved neither by changing the command of God, nor by abdicating our dominion. Neither is possible. The solution lies only in God’s promise to redeem human beings from their unbelief and restore them to their created purpose. The promise of God’s redemption is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the promise of God’s redemption toward which all creation strains in eager longing, as Paul observes in Romans 8.

In the meantime, we may note that according to the Genesis story of creation, humans have been created to exercise dominion according to the likeness of God, in God’s image. In other words, we are to exercise dominion as God exercises dominion: graciously, for the good of all, for the preservation of all creation, including generations of people and other creatures to come.

Exercising dominion in God’s way will require difficult decisions, based on knowledge—including scientific knowledge—of the way the world is and works. This is our vocation, our calling as human beings. Trusting God to be God, we are to enjoy and take care of the creation, including our neighbors and all other creatures as well.

Caretakers of Creation

This vocational theme is the central theme of the second story. According to Genesis 2, God creates the human being to take care of creation (Gen. 2:15–16). This work involves more than gardening: any work which contributes to the wellbeing of creation—parenting, teaching, engineering, doctoring, enforcing the laws, manufacturing, entertaining, counseling, wrecking and salvage, preaching—the list is endless. We are created for the work of caring for the goodness of creation in whatever circumstance God gives us opportunity.

In the Company of Others

In the course of the creation story, God observes that it is not good for the human being to be alone and He creates companions of every variety. But alas, there was no suitable partner for the man in the way God desired it. And so God

...causes a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then God took one of the man’s ribs ... and the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” — Genesis 2:21–22

And the man is completely awed by God’s new creation. It is love at first sight.

“This at last,” the man exclaims, “is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman for out of the Man this one was taken” ...

and the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” — Genesis 2:23–25

Never was there a more promising beginning to a love affair.

Like the dominion theme of Genesis 1, however, humans have managed to make the companionship theme of Genesis 2 problematic. We have entered into competition and conflict about who is going to lord it over whom. The beautiful love affair quickly becomes the battle of the sexes. Again, we have reason to hope God will not abandon us to discord with our closest and dearest neighbor. God is determined to save us from ourselves.

Notice that the woman was created from the rib of the man. Not the head bone and not the foot bone, but the rib! God intends the man and the woman to be equals, to live side by side—not one over the other, but partners. The details of the relationship God leaves for us to work out. There are many variations on how we might enjoy the partnership, but one thing is clear: we are created for companionship, for the partnership of caring for others—not one lording it over the other. They are to be partners in caring for creation, which they themselves are granted the pleasure of conceiving. As the Lord commands, “*Be fruitful and multiply*” (1:28). The command makes the man and woman partners, both equally essential to the life of creation. Lordship belongs to God alone. Honoring God as God frees us to live together, enjoying the creation and caring for its wellbeing.

Looking Ahead to the Next Session

At this point you can’t fail to notice that interpretation of the Biblical story of creation, as well as living it out, has tended to go awry in selfish, self-centered ways. This brings us to the subject of the next study—Genesis 3 – 11: The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Aftermath. These chapters tell the story of what happens when humanity loses its faith in the promise and related commands of God’s Word as the defining reality of our lives.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBRh4eOCpQQ&feature=related>. Or type *Earth and All Stars* into your web browser.

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reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



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Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series will offer suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. According to the Genesis stories of creation, how does God wish to be known? How does God's self-revelation in the stories shape the Christian life in relation to God? What, for example, is the implication for prayer, worship, and witness?
2. According to the Genesis stories of creation, what is the three-fold purpose of the human being? What is the implication of this understanding for Christian life in the world? Luther observed that the picture of the father changing the infant's dirty diaper is a picture of true holiness. What do you think he meant? How do the Genesis stories of creation picture the truly human life?
3. According to the stories of creation, how does God intend for male and female to live together? What most threatens the partnership of male and female? Where does the promise of a fruitful relationship lie?
4. While it is a topic to be explored more fully in the next session, how do you see the relationship of science and Bible at this point? What is the Bible good for? What is science good for? What does the Bible tell us? What does science tell us?
5. Finally, our study of Genesis 1 – 2 has focused on three themes. What other aspects of the stories do you find interesting or challenging? Discuss these themes with friends. Consider:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the passage?*
 - b. *What additional background knowledge would help me better engage the passage?*
 - c. *What does the passage promise to faith?*
 - d. *What does the passage demand of faith?*

Pastor Thompson is available via email to offer additional discussion suggestions. Contact him at:

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and the article on pages 6 and 7, go to:*
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Select: Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 3